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NOVEMBER 1985
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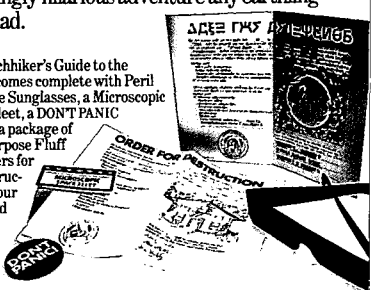

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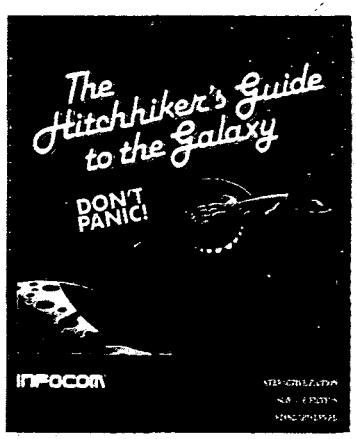

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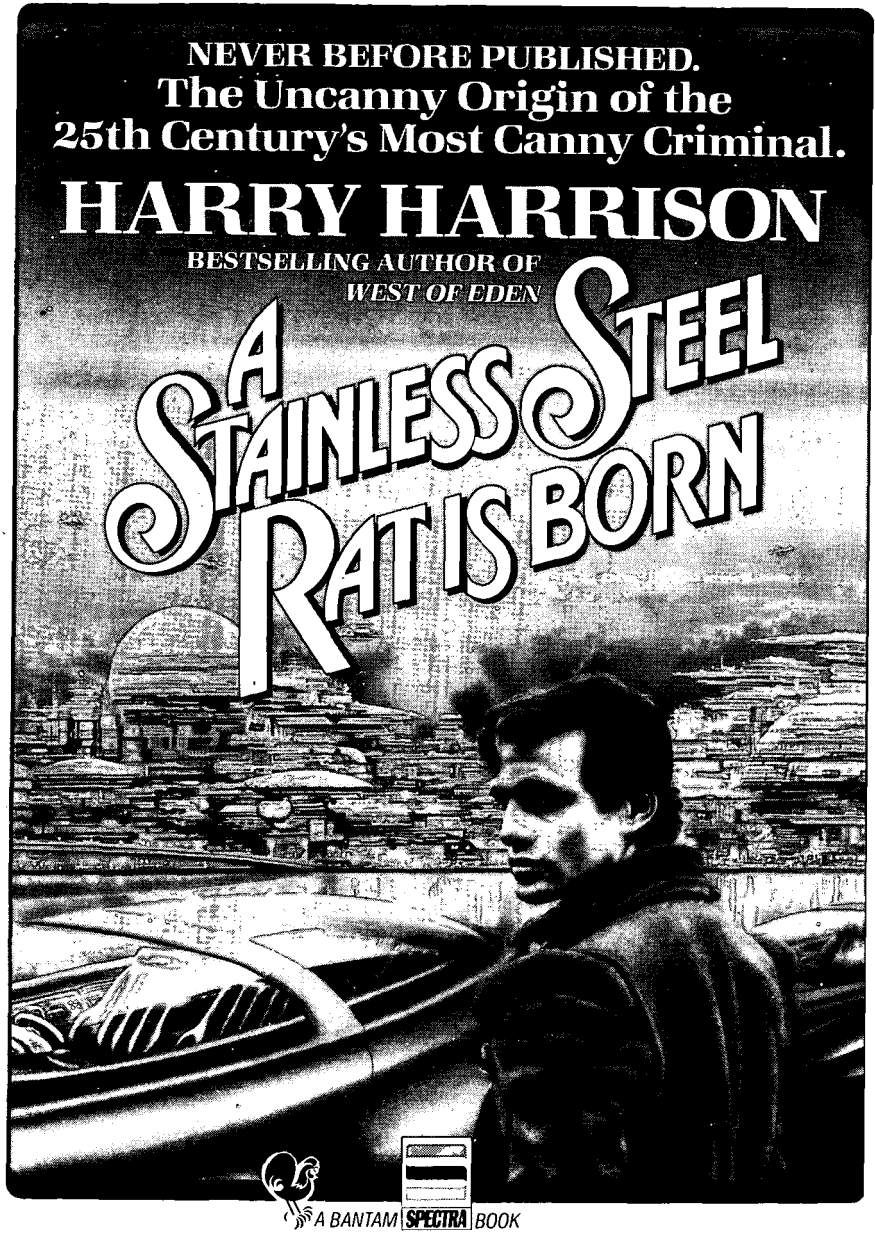

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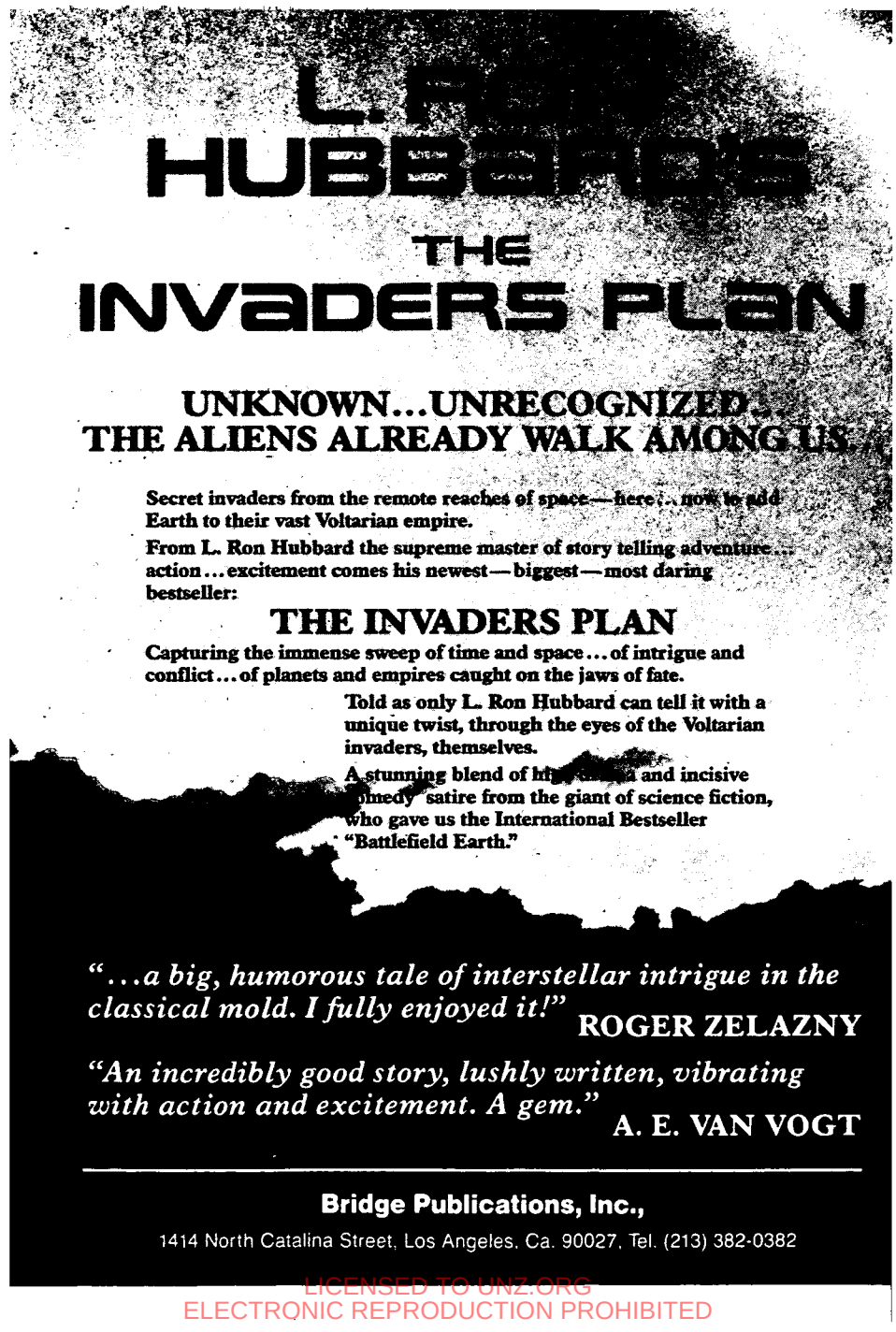
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EDITORIAL

EDITORS

by Isaac Asimov

I sometimes write editorials based on strongly disapproving letters we receive, but, of course, we get the other kind, too, and sometimes one of them is worth an editorial.

For instance, we received a very nice letter from Malcolm K. McClintick of Indianapolis, which is not appearing in the letter column, because I want to discuss it here. In fact, I'm writing this editorial precisely because he asked me to do so in a paragraph that goes as follows:

". . . in a future editorial I wish you'd address this question: If writers have so much trouble getting started, if fiction (good fiction) is that difficult, if so few submissions are close to the mark, then exactly what magical gift is it that editors have? Why is it that Eleanor Sullivan, Cathleen Jordan, Shawna McCarthy, etc. etc. can recognize a salable story but writers can't? And if they know what a salable story is, why aren't they getting rich writing such stories, books, etc., instead of editing them? How and why did they become editors in the first place, and what qualified them to do so?"

I haven't made a deep study of the subject; I have no scholarly knowledge of editors and what makes them tick. However, I have thoughts on the subject (as I have on most subjects), and I am willing to spread them out for your consideration.

Naturally, I must begin with a bit of introspection. When this magazine was first proposed to me by Joel Davis nearly a decade ago, I'm sure he imagined that I would be the editor. I repelled that notion with such firmness and with such an obvious horror that it was mentioned only once and then never again.

Why? There are some financial reasons, of course. An editor's job is full-time. Even when she (by which I mean "he or she," please) is not in the office 40 hours a week, she probably fills out the time at home and she is a rare editor indeed if she doesn't spend considerably more than 40 hours a week at the job. I simply cannot spend that much time at editing because editing would deprive me of that time for writing and editing is a notoriously underpaid job while my writing is a notoriously overpaid one. I couldn't take the financial loss.

But that is not germane. Even

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if editorial work were to represent a financial gain to me, I would repel it with the same fervor. Writing and editing are two *different* professions and require two *different* personalities. I am a true writer in that I would much rather write than edit (or than almost anything, actually—and I stick in that "almost" only to avoid the obvious witticisms) so that even if I were a reasonably competent editor, I would stick to writing. In the same way, there are some who find such satisfaction in editing, that they would rather edit than write, even if they were reasonably competent writers. (And all three women mentioned in the letter are competent writers who have been published.)

But, as a matter of fact, I would *not* be a reasonably competent editor; I would, in my opinion, be in the running for the world's worst editor. (Yes, I know I help edit a lot of anthologies but I confine my work to helping select stories from those already published and therefore already known to be good, and writing introductions and headnotes.) It is not just that I don't know the machinery of putting magazines together and the routine of running them. I presume I can learn that, given a little time. It is that I *have no way of telling a good story from a bad one.*

Or, to use Mr. McClintick's phrase, I cannot "recognize a salable story." Sure, I can tell when a story is illiterate, stupid, or un-

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readable, but I can't tell a nearly good story from a very good one.

How is that possible? Don't I write good stories as a matter of course and every once in a while don't I write a very good story? Don't I almost never write a bad story? Then how is it I can't tell a good story from a bad one?

Because I'm lucky. I just happen to write good ones, without knowing how or why. When I do write an occasional story that's not so good, I don't recognize it as such. I hand it in to editors with the same silly smile I wear on my face when I bring in my good ones. Or, to put it another way, I present my good ones with the same hidden misgivings I present my not-so-good ones.

Other good writers may not be as hopelessly ignorant as I am but I'll bet a great many of them are not literate enough in the editorial sense to be trusted in the editorial chair for two minutes.

But now let's look at it from the other side. The beauteous Shawna can tell a good story from a bad one. I'm afraid we must accept that as indisputable. She took the Hugo as best editor in 1984; and in both 1984 and 1985, no fewer than seven stories that she had selected for this magazine were also selected for Nebula nominations.

And although Shawna is paid about as much as the magazine can afford to pay her, my personal feeling is that she is worth much more money, and can probably use much more, too. Well, then, if she has such a sure knowledge of what a good story is, why doesn't she write good stories and make a lot more money?

Well, as it happens (forgive me, Shawna dear) knowing what makes a good story does not necessarily mean that you can sit down and think up an idea of your own, and devise a scheme of your own for putting that idea into effective story form, and then get all the necessary events into the right order and express them with just the right words. Knowing and doing don't necessarily fit into the same head (though they might, I know).

And even if Shawna *could* write a good story if she chose, she might simply *hate* to go through all the work involved. I have known enough writers to know that the process of writing can be torture, even for good, competent writers, and I have read articles that maintained that alcoholism is an occupational hazard of writers for that reason. I'm lucky. It isn't hard work for me and I can stay at the typewriter all day, caroling old English madrigals as I write, but Shawna might well think that she would rather edit for a pittance than plunge into unending misery for a dubious pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

You might say that there are people who are both good editors and good writers, and I agree. John Campbell, Horace Gold, and Tony Boucher, all grade-A editors, were also grade-A writers, but all three of them, once they became editors,

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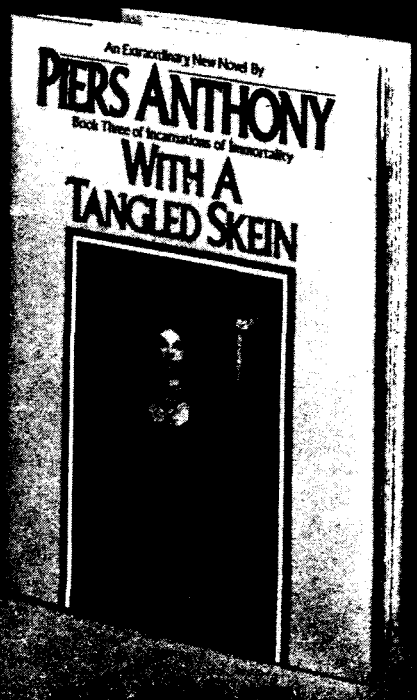

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just about stopped writing. They preferred being editors.

Occasionally, you get someone who is so evenly balanced that he keeps oscillating. Consider Fred Pohl who, for many years, alternated between some years as an editor and some years as a writer, top-notch in both respects. I suspect, though, the alternation produced high tension, and that he was very relieved when he finally toppled over, once and for all, on the writer's side.

But "how and why did they become editors and what qualified them to do so?"

To begin with, you have to want to be an editor. That means you must like the subject matter of a magazine and be ready to read incredible quantities of stories of that kind. Shawna, for instance, had, all through her childhood, devoured science fiction, and when she found out that George Scithers was looking for an assistant, and that she might have a chance to read science fiction *for money,* she applied for the job at once.

Second, you have to learn how to be an editor, just as you have to learn anything else. Before George hired her, Shawna had obtained a job as editorial assistant at *Firehouse Magazine,* a magazine for firemen. Because the editor resigned, she took his place, and learned the mechanics of putting out a magazine. It was hard work, but she had a talent for it.

Then, when she got the job with George, she learned how to do the kind of work one had to do in a science fiction magazine. She spent years working under the direction of two different editors, and finally she became editor herself with the January, 1983 issue.

At any moment during this apprentice period, if she had shown any serious defect, she would have been released.

George Scithers had done editorial work a-plenty before he became founding editor of this magazine. He has a small publishing house of his own, but it is large enough to have taught him the trade. Eleanor Sullivan, of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* spent many years as managing editor under Fred Dannay before becoming editor in her own right. Cathleen Jordan worked at Doubleday as an editor before coming to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* and before that she had worked under a very good editor named Larry Ashmead, who had himself first worked under a very good editor named Dick Winslow.

There are exceptions, of course. John Campbell had no editorial experience whatever, when he became the greatest editor science fiction had ever seen. —But he was a genius, and there are no rules for that. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov, Ms. McCarthy, et al.,

Thank you for a fine magazine. I love a good share of the stories and always try to read all of them. Sometimes I feel I wasted my time, but usually I am rewarded with a fine reading experience. I wish you printed more short stories, so that I would have more stories to read (I have a short attention span).

Please, please try to choose stories that do not have sex in them. I am not a prude (I am an old married lady of 36), but I have read so many good SF stories that did not deal with sex that I know that it is not necessary to a good story. I'm not against a little love interest, if it is required for the story. I just get the feeling that your authors throw the sex in in order to be published, the way that skin or profanity is added to an otherwise complete movie just to get that valued R rating. The Good Doctor has demonstrated over and over by example and in editorials that a story can and should stand on its own merits, not on some inserted steamy scenes. Next time you receive a story with copulation in it, rethink the story line. Is this story really worth the postage it took to send it to you? Encourage these would-be authors to write romance novels—not science fiction. Encountering sexual passages in an otherwise interesting story is akin to trying to work a detailed experiment in a chem lab and having to step over a coupled couple several times in the process. It's just plain distracting, that's what it is, and I don't need it mixed in with my science fiction, thank you very much.

The above was not worded nearly as well as I wanted it to be, which brings me to another item. I really enjoy the letters section. It is a fine sampling of literate America. I see letters from people who can actually express complete thoughts on paper. Do you have to do much grammatical correction? Are they all perfect spellers? Do you ever reword an awkward phrase? I know that you do not print all letters received; you couldn't. But the overall tone of the letters is so refreshing. Even when I do not agree with the writer, I am impressed with the writer's ability to express himself/herself. In my small town the people I meet on a regular basis do not have much of a grasp of the English language. It is refreshing to be reminded through the letters section that there are a great many people out there who can not only think, but who are capable of communicating their

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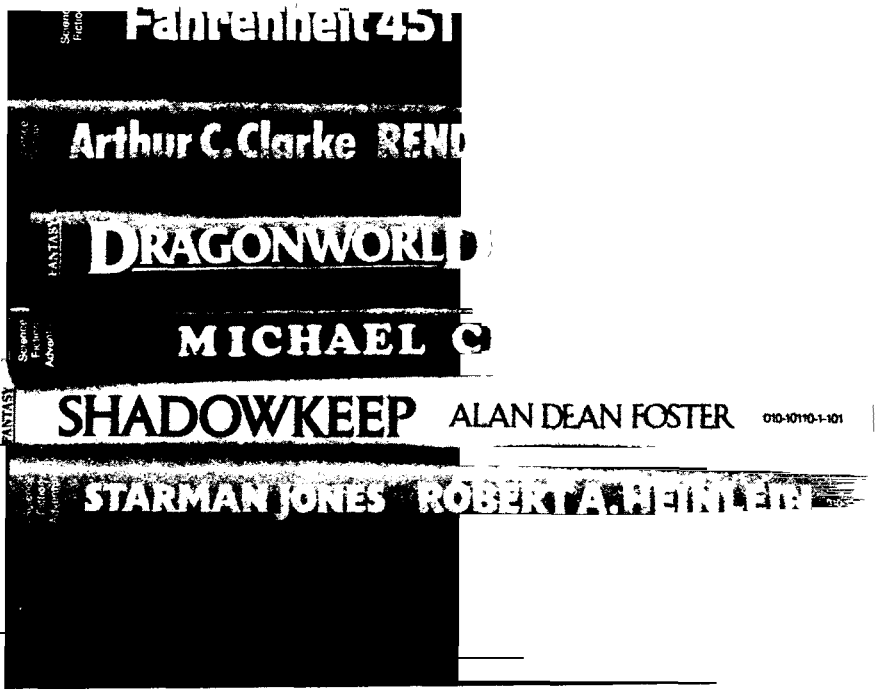

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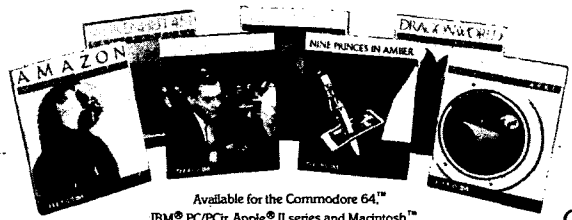

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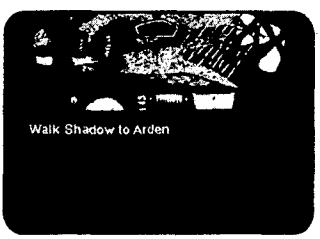

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thoughts through the written word. I am encouraged.

Anne Cox
35068 Pittsburg Road
St. Helens, OR 97051

As far as I'm concerned, I agree with you completely. I assure you that our authors do not need to include sex to be published. It's just that the creative spirit, unless firmly held down by censorship, would like to deal with so all-permeating and all-powerful an aspect of human life and behavior. Among stories that deal, in some part, with sex, we try to choose those that are well-written and where the sex plays an important role in the story.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor A and Shawna;

I read with great interest your editorial (Slush) in February's issue. I'm a former "2b," meaning I am now a "not 2b." Yes, I was one of those who sent story after story to any place that had an address. Well, I re-read a few of those stories . . . please accept my apologies. I'll never do it again! Now don't fret, Good Doctor, we 2bs are a resilient bunch. About a year ago I started doing paintings of characters and situations from "The Great Science Fiction Novel I'm Going To Write Someday." They sold! I get very little rejection now (art-wise anyway) and I can read your excellent magazine without any twinges of "if only" and "I wish." Keep up the good work! Yours truly,

J.A. Cox
Nepean, Ontario
Canada

A good point. Talent is not a unitary matter. It is quite possible to lack the necessary talent in one direction and to possess a superabundance of it in another direction.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have just recently subscribed to your magazine, having previously been an admirer of your books. I almost, however, did not write; your response to Mr. Blondel's letter in the March 1985 issue brought me to the final decision.

On to the subject of the letter. It concerns an inaccuracy(?) in the otherwise excellent novella "Sailing to Byzantium" by Robert Silverberg, published in the February 1985 issue. This story (as you know) concerns a robot programmed so well that he even goes as far as to deceive himself. But upon finding out what he really was, and then rejoining with Gioia, he made a comment implying that the visitor was the best judge of accuracy. Wouldn't any program believe that its information was accurate, regardless? If you, Dr. Asimov, were to find out that you were a robot, how would you be able to tell if you were or were not programmed accurately? Please give the matter some thought.

One other matter concerning a letter from Mr. Quayle (or is it Kwale) in the March 1985 issue of the magazine. I have only been receiving the magazine for three months now, and none of the three editorials have "further enhanced the aura, reputation, myth, and book sales of Isaac Azimov." (The misspell is part of the quote.) I

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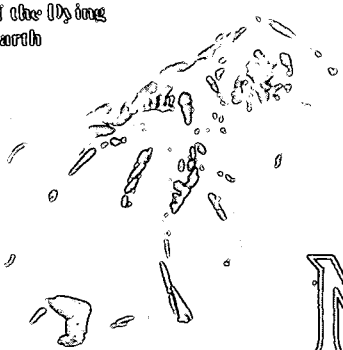

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think perhaps Mr. Quayle should think again.
Sincerely,

J. David Rosen
Colorado Springs, CO

A good question to brood over. Many of us are programmed to believe some theory of religion or politics or economics at our mother's knee, to consider any questioning of it to be blasphemous or heretical or perverse. —And yet so many of those programmed grow up to question these things and to tear away. A robot, sufficiently intelligent, ought to be able to do the same thing, perhaps. (See my new novel Robots and Empire, *by the way.)*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

From all the static you're getting in "Letters"—well!

Let me say that I am proud to have received my *very first* rejection slip from *you,* form letter or not. (I may have it framed.) And thank you for sending me your *IAsfm* writers' guidelines.

Yours truly,

Edison W. Heniford
San Francisco, CA

P.S.

Please tell The Great Curmudgeon for me that if certain things were "flatly impossible," we would still be living on a flat earth. Not to mention the fact that the sun would still be orbiting the earth. Fact has always been (though vigorously denied in some quarters) what *seems* to be true at the moment. Today's hypothesis, tomorrow's snicker.

That's a pleasant generalization in your postscript but, dear friend, if it is your intention to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge in order to flap your arms and fly—you had better listen to me when I tell you that is flatly impossible.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and
Ms. McCarthy,

Although we have been subscribers for two years or so now, and have derived considerable enjoyment from your fine magazine, I have never been moved to actually sit down and write to you before. However, the recent spate of correspondents in your Letters section who have written requesting that puns be returned to the pages of *IAsfm* has finally spurred me to put in my two cents' worth.

I am a normal person who has been married to a punster for quite a few years now. Although I am quite willing to agree with Ms. McCarthy that there are some puns for which the perpetrator ought to be shot, over the years I have developed a certain appreciation for a well-crafted play on words. (By the way, Doctor, I think it's a terrible shame that the editor turned down your suggestion of "Polmes For Holmes" as the title for your collection of Sherlockian limericks.) I have even gained some small mastery of the craft myself, although I admit that it has been more from motives of self-defense than anything else. Therefore, as a person who can at least understand both sides of the issue, I feel that I am qualified to offer a suggestion which might resolve it.

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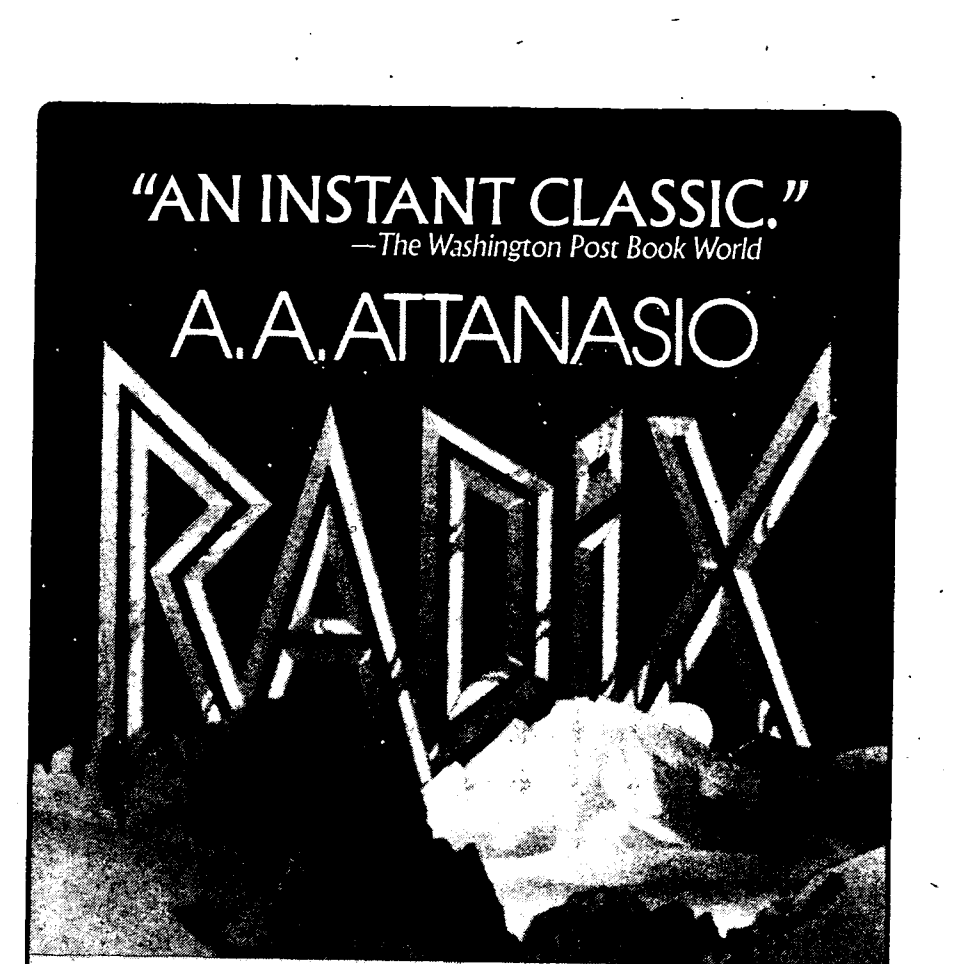
—The Washington Post Book World

A. A. ATTANASIO

RADIX



"Here stands a high talent; a truly amazing, original, towering talent."
—Los Angeles Times

"An exhilarating novel...brimming with living characters, splendid adventures...sheer pleasure to read."—Minneapolis Tribune

A BANTAM SPECTRA BOOK

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Would it not be possible to arrange a compromise in which one issue per year was devoted not only to excellent science fiction but also to punning? Any worthy story submissions that were especially wealthy in word-plays could be saved for this special annual issue, and perhaps Dr. Asimov could write down and file away some of his gems to include also. Mr. Mooney seems to have quite an eye for visual puns, and I would imagine that some other regular contributors have skills in that direction as well. In order to spare Ms. McCarthy's sensibilities, this annual issue could be timed to coincide with her vacation—I am assuming, of course, Dr. Asimov, that you *do* allow the poor lady to take a little time off each year. I am sure that thousands of people like my husband would welcome a joyous annual plethora of puns, while thousands more would be grateful that it came only once a year. (If you think about it, that sums up the two main reactions to Christmas as well.)

Before closing, let me say one thing about all those readers who write in to ask you to discontinue one or another segment of *IAsfm,* simply because they don't happen to be interested in it: *don't listen to them!* Variety is the spice of life, and everyone has different tastes when it comes to spices. My husband and I are a perfect case in point: the first things he turns to are the Viewpoint, the Gaming section and On Books, none of which I even glance at. The first thing *I* read is the fiction, and that's what he gets around to last of all. You're doing just fine: don't let 'em rattle you!

Sincerely,

Mrs. Karen Moore

Vacation for the beauteous Shawna? Bite your tongue. I have told her that if ever she (against my express orders) decides to have an offspring, she can have three days off beforehand and three days off afterward, which, together with the actual date of delivery, makes a week. And that's without pay! Vacations! Bah! Humbug!

—Ebenezer Scrooge

Dear Shawna:

I haven't written in a long time, but March's letters were so entertaining I just had to join in:

1. I'm glad to see that action, plot, humor and science are sneaking back into your pages in increasing numbers. I'm afraid I agreed with Lynda Carraher (12/84), and even with the raging (but wasn't she cute?) Saundra Landis (3/85) in so far as that 1984 had too many stories which were too slow, and in which I could find no science fiction, or even fantasy. Through most of 1984, I'm very sorry to say, I no longer hungrily gobbled up each issue the instant it came. But things have been picking up lately, and I'm writing this to once more place my vote (see how much good it did last time?) for action and plot. Thank you and please keep up what I perceive as a trend in that direction.

2. Which brings me to my next observation. In Mid-December, 1984 Letters, Dr. A says that readers' letters are basically ignored, be-

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What happens when a professor of medieval literature gets soused and conjures up a shapely demon right in the middle of a faculty party?

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Well, if the professor is Willis Baxter and the demon is a four-thousand-year-old lush and lovely "young" lady named Anathae, with none too ladylike a sense of humor—the result is bound to be wild.

Did she really turn the state governor into a big fat pig? And could that be the Devil himself, in full fury, there in the living room? Follow the magical antics of Willis Baxter and the demon he learns to love, in the year's most enchanting and extravagant fantasy romp.
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cause "a very small percentage of activists skew the results." Yet, you, Shawna, have indicated (to be polite?) that you do follow reader input: e.g., the elimination of Profiles. (Your honesty is showing, Doc!). I assume you must listen somewhat—you can always ignore the repeaters and the self-righteous true believers; and even a small percentage can be a representative percentage.

3. I assume from your content and comments that the sex/gore controversy has been resolved in favor of realism (can any realistic future contain humans without sex or violence? They wouldn't be humans). I think, however, that novel ideas are for both adults and children, especially children with brave and intelligent parents like Celia Friedman (2/85). I feel sorry for the child of the woman who, with her head in the sand, said she was hiding a certain issue until her son was 15. Does she hide her TV?

4. Finally, thank you, Shawna, for limiting the ads to the first 50–60 pages; but why discriminate against the unlucky first story? Leave the ads in the non-fiction and between stories only. They only break the mood, and nobody stops to read them while they are in the middle of a story. (You promised!)

And thank you, Doctor, for being a model of Reason in a world of humans bent on blind self destruction. How about a George and Azazel story on the (no doubt catastrophic) effects of all humans acting rational for a change?

Henry Lee Morgenstern
423 Whitehead Street
Key West, FL

I'm afraid that no editor can afford to follow the desires of letter-writers in a blind and automatic fashion. The vast majority of readers never write and we must take them into account. How? By doing what the editor thinks best. Shawna has enormous editorial talent, and I trust her judgment. She has to decide whether the letters represent an activist minority or are representative of the readers generally. She can't allow herself to be stampeded into doing something she is convinced is wrong.

—Isaac Asimov

Greetings Dr. Asimov,

I am writing this letter in response to the editorial and letters I read in the February issue of the magazine. As a non-subscriber but frequent reader of it I feel it to be my privilege to write you and voice my opinion.

I find myself in full agreement with your editorial. The editors of any magazine are far too busy to spend extra time writing critiques. Their time is better spent going through other manuscripts in order to find those few stories that do stand out from the rest.

However as a struggling writer I do find myself sometimes wishing for these very critiques. It is much easier to have someone else try to find the flaws in your story than it is to look at it yourself and decide what is wrong with it.

But it is a necessary trait for any good writer to develop. The ability to look at your own work and decide what is good and what is not can save a lot of grief. And hopefully save the editors some time

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and effort and allow them to read more of the good stories.

To this date I have not managed to publish anything. But I shall go on trying until I do. All the aspiring writers out there who are worth anything will do the same, no matter what type of rejection slip they get.

And on that note I will leave you. Keep up the good work.

Richard N. Moller
Lenexa, KS

P.S. However much I like writing, I hate spelling. Am I ever glad for dictionaries. I couldn't even make it through this letter without them.

It would be nice if English spelling made sense, but even as it is only ten percent of English words (my estimate) present spelling problems. You should make an effort, whenever you are forced to use the dictionary, to look at the word in question and make an honest effort to memorize its spelling. Being able to speed along without worrying about spelling would make writing so much easier that you would be able to persuade yourself (and, perhaps, others) that it was much better as well.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I was somewhat disappointed by your editorial entitled *Catastrophes* in the mid-December issue of your magazine. I liked it well enough for what it was, but the title had given me the thought that it was, at last, a treatment of a subject that has fascinated me for a long time.

Several years ago I bought a book entitled *Catastrophe Theory and its Applications* by Tim Poston and Ian Stewart. Unfortunately, it takes me about two weeks of study to recapture my integral calculus when I must use it and matrix and linear algebra might as well be Greek to me. But the parts of the book I can understand at all seem to me to indicate the catastrophe theory is widely applicable and might well be the subject of a popular treatment.

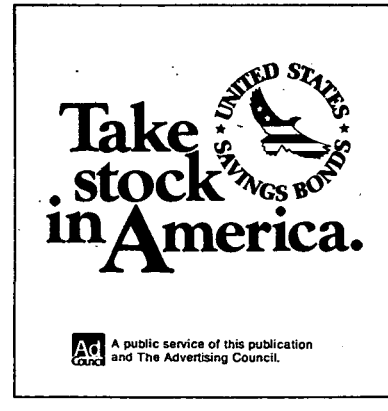
That is why I am writing: to commend this subject to your attention.

Sincerely,

Lars Eighner
4002½ Avenue B
Austin, TX 78751-4517

Unfortunately, I can't cope with catastrophe in its mathematical sense, and must restrict myself to catastrophe in all its other senses. I am sorry to have disappointed you, but if I were to try to wade out into water that is over my head, I would have disappointed you even more.

—Isaac Asimov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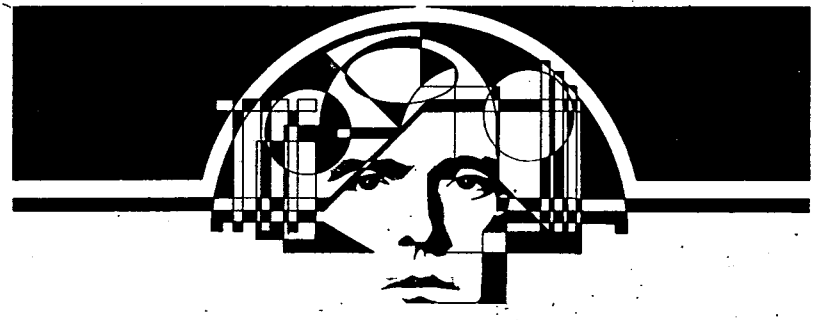
MARTIN GARDNER

DIRAC'S SCISSORS



Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac, one of the great creative geniuses of modern quantum theory, died last year at the age of 82 in Tallahassee where he was a professor at Florida State University. This month I wish to introduce a delightful topological puzzle involving a pair of scissors and some string. Dirac invented it when he was in his twenties to help explain one of the strangest of all the properties of the electron.

If you rotate a chair 360 degrees, it returns to its former state with respect to everything in the room. But if an electron is rotated 360 degrees, it does *not* return to the same state as before. It has to be given another full turn, 720 degrees in all, to bring it back to its former state with respect to its surroundings.

It is impossible to understand why this is so without getting into the advanced mathematics of quantum mechanics. Finding that his beginning students were made uncomfortable by such a weird property of certain particles, Dirac thought of a way to demonstrate something analogous. I first learned about Dirac's scissors, as his puzzle has been called, in 1959 when I was writing the Mathematical Games column in *Scientific American*. I wrote to Dirac about it, and one of my treasured possessions is his terse reply from Cambridge University:

Dear Mr. Gardner
I am sorry I was too busy to answer your letter earlier. I first thought

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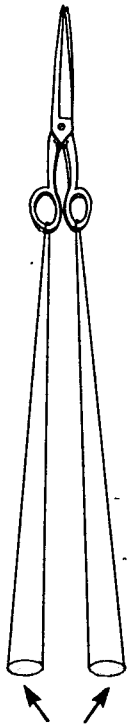
of the problem of the strings about 1929. I used it to illustrate a property of rotations, that two rotations of a body about an axis can be continuously deformed, through a set of motions which each end up with the original position, into no motion at all.

It is a consequence of this property of rotations that a spinning body can have half a quantum of angular momentum, but cannot have any other fraction of a quantum.

Yours sincerely
P.A.M. Dirac

Dirac's last sentence refers to the fact that the intensity of spin of all particles known as fermions is plus or minus ½ depending on the direction of spin. Regrettably, this is not the place to speak about the mystery of particle spin, or the way James Blish exploits it in the working of his famous antigravity device, the "spindizzy." Spin is something vaguely like the spin of a top, but impossible to visualize or to explain in terms of classic laws of physics.

At this point please stop reading and get a pair of scissors and a supply of string. You'll need two pieces of string, each about ten feet long. Pass



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each through a handle of the scissors, then tie the ends to make a loop. Stand with your feet inside the loops as shown in Figure 1, so that when you raise the scissors to the level of your face the loops will produce four untwisted strands of cord running from scissors to floor.

Hold the scissors vertically, pointing toward the ceiling, then give the scissors a full turn of 360 degrees (in either direction) around a vertical axis. This will, of course, twist the cords.

Is it possible to untwist the cords without rotating the scissors in any way? You may move the scissors about in space, and manipulate the strings as you please (without of course taking them from under your shoes), but the scissors must always keep the same orientation in space. The answer is that it is not possible to untangle the cords. You will be able to alter the way the string is tangled, but no amount of manipulation of the strings can bring the structure back to its original state.

After you have convinced yourself that the task is impossible, go back to the original untangled position. Now give the scissors *two* full turns (720 degrees) in either direction. Believe it or not, it is now possible to return the scissors and string to their original state without rotating the scissors in any way! To a topologist this means that after two full rotations of the scissors, the topological structure of scissors and string, relative to you and everything else in the room, has not been altered.

If you are unable to manipulate the string and scissors so as to remove the tangle—remember, the scissors must always point upward and not be turned in any way—you'll find the surprising solution on page 92.

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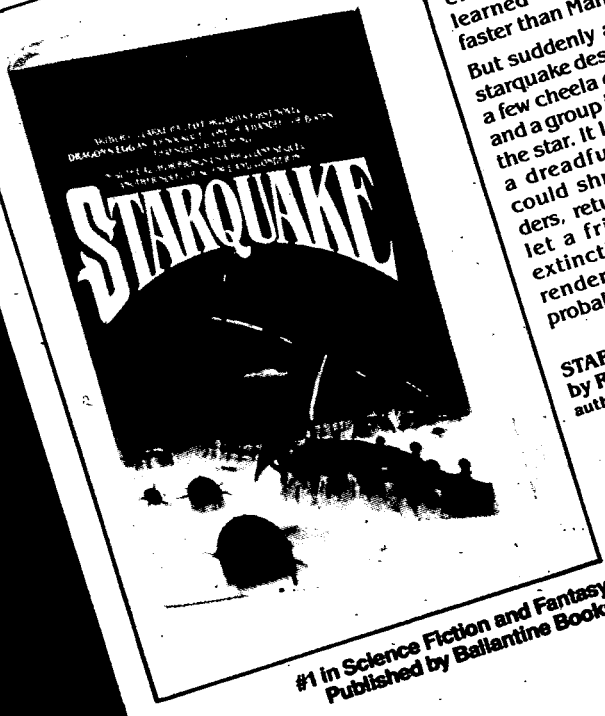

The humans were about to leave the neutron star Dragon's Egg. There, eons ago, they had discovered the thriving native race of cheela who lived—and learned—a million times faster than Man.

But suddenly a monstrous starquake destroyed all but a few cheela on the surface and a group in orbit around the star. It left the humans a dreadful choice: they could shrug their shoulders, return to Earth, and let a friendly race face extinction; or remain to render assistance...and probably die!

STARQUAKE
by Robert L. Forward
author of Dragon's Egg

#1 in Science Fiction and Fantasy Published by Ballantine Books

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

A new colony is being developed on a previously uninhabited planet. The people who are establishing this colony are dependent upon supplies shipped to them. The freighter captains who carry these supplies must be able to handle interstellar trading and avoid pirates to get the goods through to the colonists.

This is the premise for the computer game *Sundog* by FTL Games for the Apple II ($39.95 at your local store). You command the star freighter *Sundog* and your job is to gather supplies and settlers for the new colony. While the plot may sound familiar, the game offers interesting innovations in graphics and design. It has complex strategies and a wealth of detail (12 star systems, 18 planets, and over 50 cities) combined with an ease of play that encourages numerous replays.

Played entirely with a joystick, *Sundog* uses menus and windows to allow you to make decisions; when a window appears on the screen in the course of play, you press the joystick to point to the desired item or words within the menu or window.

For example, while visiting a city, you may get a view of a building or of a street encounter. Perhaps a gang of thugs have decided to relieve you of your hard-earned profits. The window will show you what you see as the victim, and a menu will offer you choices such as complying with their demands, fighting them, or running. If they outnumber you, discretion is the best option—run! If they have you surrounded—well, easy come, easy go. (You can always make more money if you are alive and healthy.) You use the joystick to point to one of the options available on the menu and the computer then shows you what happened as a result of your choice. If you prefer, you can manipulate the icons in the window to watch the action unfold.

The action in *Sundog* is realistic, giving you the feeling of actually participating in the adventure instead of just sitting at a keyboard. Nice design touches include panhandlers insulting you if you don't give them a handout, and a bartender turning hostile if you don't buy him a drink while plying him for information. If you want to buy an item, you'll probably have to haggle over terms with the seller.

Your main purpose within the game is to supply the colony with necessities, but the colonists are unable to pay for the goods—you must finance the supply operation, and cover the overhead of operating a starfreighter, by being an interplanetary trader.

This aspect of trading is one of *Sundog's* best features. It's easy to get so involved with exploring new planets for trading purposes, and

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with business negotiations once you get there, that you almost forget about the colony.

Trading consists of more than buying food on one planet, spare parts on another, and selling them for fuel on a third. Certain items are in greater demand on one planet than on another; you have to learn where you get the most return for your efforts. Prices fluctuate considerably. As you travel through the different star systems, you must learn what goods are available, which ones are in demand, and who is offering the most for what. Not all the deals are obvious, either.

Just when you think you've made a great deal, and your cargo hold is full, there are sudden dangers ahead. Pirates prey on freighter captains like yourself, stealing your valuable cargo if they catch you alone between planets. If you want to keep what's in your cargo bays, you'll have to fight for it.

Combat is three dimensional: you maneuver your ship with the joystick until the pirate ship appears on the screen; line him up in your crosshairs, and fire your lasers. Of course, he is firing back at you, but your defensive shields will reduce the effectiveness of his attack. As your shields are hit, they grow weaker or may be knocked out altogether; they regenerate part of their strength between hits, however.

While you're fighting the pirate, offensive and defensive systems are guzzling fuel rapidly. If you run out of fuel, you're stranded in space. You can radio for help, but it probably won't arrive in time. If you run low on fuel or if your ship is badly damaged, you can avoid com-

(continued on page 135)

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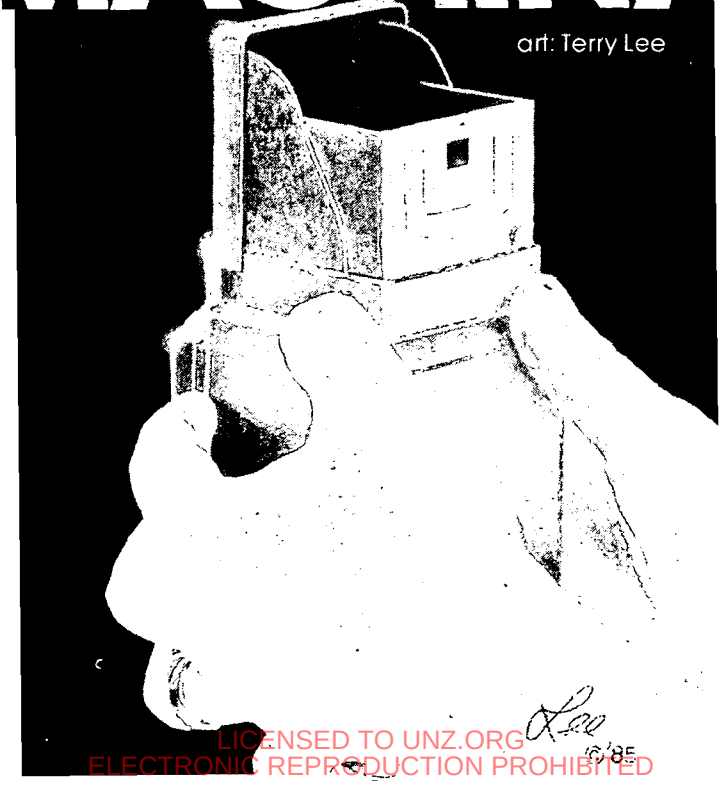
poet who's published regularly in
ary journals. My fiction has appeared in *Rolling Stone*
live in rural Nebraska, surrounded by wood-burning
olutionaries, failing banks, and busted farmers. 'Deus e
Machina' is my first attempt at science fiction."

by J. V. Brummels

DEUS EX MACHINA

art: Terry Lee



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1. The End of the World Comes to the Suburbs

A gust of wind scurried up the deserted street past peeling and faded houses, rain gutters dangling like hanged men, over the tall grass, and through the thick summer foliage of the trees. Oaks, maples, dogwoods and seedless cottonwoods shifted their stark shadows as it passed, stilled again slowly as if waving good-bye to the dust devils skittering away. Only when the shadows crossed the faces of the houses did their vacant expressions change.

Inside one of them, its yard clean of debris, all its doors hanging straight on their hinges, in a darkened room silent except for a low hum, David sat in a high-backed, thickly padded chair. Intent on the screen before him where, fixed like night stars, green characters glowed and dimmed with a weak pulse, he took no notice of the wind that passed beyond the wall. His hands spanned a keyboard, and, occasionally, the little finger of the right moved far to the side and depressed a button. When that happened, the lines of characters started a stiff-legged march up the screen, much like small children climbing stairs. Infrequently, David's other fingers stiffened, arched, and jabbed at the keys, and the symmetry on the screen disintegrated. Fragments of sentences, marks of punctuation, letters, and numerals darted about, circled, grew, and shrunk in a mad free-for-all before skidding back into place on the black screen, piling again into a whole. The hands would slow back into position, the room recapture its stillness, and the finger would resume its tiny counterpoint.

A black dog came to sit beside David's chair. Except for his gray muzzle, he formed no more than a shadow in the darkened room. Had David paused, he might have thought about the functions of the dog's neo-cortex in the same way a monk six centuries before might have lifted his weakened eyes from his gold-leaf and careful transcription to consider the souls of animals. Did a dog, even one so ancient as this, think beyond *fetch* and *ball* and *food?* What did the dreams of dogs teach them? What did a dog make of *thunder* or *birth?* How did this dog recollect his seasons, understand the phases of the sun? Now, David only patted the dog's head absently. The dog lay down to wait.

In the upper right-hand corner of the screen a pale red rectangle appeared. After a time it began to flash. David paid no more attention to it than he had to the wind. David perceived only the world presented by some second, interior set of senses, the images of that world palpable to those senses only at the end of a long journey through the maze of his own neocortex, articulated only after much bargaining between his soul and his native, his only language.

Much later, after the last line of green characters staggered off the top

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of the screen, David found himself staring at the red message box. He shook his head to clear it, found the "respond" button on the keyboard and pressed it. The screen read "Please Wait," the second word in letters twice as large as the first. He was rubbing his eyes when he heard Tella-Dotun's voice.

"Hello, David."

"Hello, Tella." He moved his fingers away and pressed his eyelids down hard, fluttered them open.

"You look tired."

"I've been working on the revisions. What time is it?"

Her gaze moved up over her screen. "Almost midnight. Eleven your time." She met his eyes again. "Sorry about asking you to wait, but it's really very busy here."

"That's OK. Sorry about not getting back to you sooner." David could only stare. After years of trying he had still not determined what it was that made her so, but he thought Tella-Dotun the most beautiful woman in the world.

She laced her fingers before her. "David, I'll have to make this brief. There are several things I need to talk to you about, and I have several more calls to make. First, how are the revisions coming?"

"Done, just now. Unless you want something more after you see these." Perhaps it was the line of her neck, or the precision with which she moved her head.

"Good. I'm glad. I'm sure they'll be fine."

Perhaps he was in love with what he saw in her dark eyes. She often looked into his so directly that, almost mesmerized and with a sense of rising panic, he would say something to make her shift her gaze. "And I suspect there won't be time for any more changes."

She glanced down at her folded hands. "No, we've decided the risk is too great. We'll go with what you've done. And we've decided against galleys as well. I hope you don't mind." When she lifted her head her face rose as if out of water.

David shrugged.

"Good. And we've made payment."

"Payment?"

"Yes. I suppose it is odd."

"I just never thought about it, under the circumstances." Or perhaps it was her hands, the tapering length of the fingers, the even pigmentation of the backs.

"I know it might not make much sense, but it's important, I think, to keep to the procedures as much as possible. I'm afraid that they are what's keeping us sane."

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They were both silent for a moment. Finally, David looked up. "It just occurred to me," he said, "that I've written my last."

Tella-Dotun gave him a small smile. "Not necessarily. Everything we hear from the Rescue Effort people is very positive."

"Do you really think it'll come off?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, David. But, yes, I believe it'll happen. Maybe I need to have faith in something."

"Have you heard about an Orientation date?"

She looked away. "Not yet, but we think they've already started with them. Rumors are flying pretty thick here Inside."

"But I'll see you for the Orientation, if it happens?"

"Yes, David, I'll be there when you're received."

No, it was her smile that made her beautiful, the white teeth against the dark skin. He tried to imagine her face without the butterlfies of yellow and blue paint around her eyes. "Somebody'll have to be. I'll probably faint."

"Don't worry, David. We'll take care of you. Just don't forget to send the revisions."

"I won't."

"See you soon, David."

"Good-bye, Tella."

David leaned back in his chair, lolled his head on the rest. The cramped muscles of his shoulders, neck, and the small of his back began to unknit. The dog sat up with a sharp little bark. "Hey, Felix," David said, reaching for the dog. He grabbed him at the neck, worked his fingers into the loose coat, moved a hand up to scratch behind the dog's ear. "Just a moment, boy." With his other hand he rummaged through an open drawer for his cigarettes. He lit a bookmatch one-handed and watched its reflection in the blank screen as it blazed and settled into a tiny flame. He found an ashtray. "Felix," he said after his first drag, "I don't think there's a whole hell of a lot I can do about it. What d'ya think, boy?" The dog met his gaze and made another little bark. "Okay, okay." David stubbed the cigarette out, punched up Tella-Dotun's route and ID numbers, and punched the "send" button. For the first time in weeks he felt hungry. A vertebra in his neck clicked against its neighbor as he stretched his hands toward the ceiling. He got to his feet and made his way through the living and dining rooms to the kitchen, Felix trailing behind.

David gazed into the almost bare kitchen cupboard, lost in thought. Felix placed a cold nose on the back of his thigh just below the fringed hem of his cut-offs. "Okay, Felix, okay." He pulled a blacplastic bag out of the cupboard and filled the dog's bowl. Felix chewed steadily, bits of

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compressed green protein occasionally dropping from his mouth to the linoleum with a click. David popped a handful of nuggets into his mouth and returned the bag to the cupboard. He gazed through the window above the sink to the west as he waited for tap water to run cold on his hand. He could see the backs of three houses, all of them abandoned, and, in the gaps between them, segments of the horizon. There, every few seconds, a finger of fire would beckon. Above, an effect like sheet lightning colored the moonless sky bluer than day.

The protein had turned to a paste in his mouth. David filled a glass and washed it down. He filled Felix's water dish and set it before him. "Would you like to go swimming, old dog?" David asked. "You used to like to go swimming." The dog, still crunching away at his dinner, raised his eyes to David. David smiled, bent down and ran both hands down Felix's neck. He straightened up, patting the dog once more, and turned to stare again out the window. Felix returned his attention to his dish; it'd been a long time since he'd been swimming.

Out of the corner of his eye David noticed movement. Next door his new neighbor lugged an ancient Rainbird sprinkler and its car wheel base into her backyard garden. She set it down, straightened, walked out of the frame of the window. David watched the spinkler sputter, spit, then spiral water down onto the twisted and sunburnt plants. The girl walked back into David's line of vision, paused, arms akimbo, at the corner of the garden to examine the sprinkler. She skipped back a step to avoid a swirl of water. Evidently satisfied, she walked to the redwood picnic table and sat.

"Felix, ball." The dog clicked away. David hurried to the refrigerator, pulled the door open and various-sized glastic bottles out. He mixed drinks beside the sink, glancing occasionally through the window. Felix, an orange ball in his mouth, clicked back in to stand patiently behind him. David made his way clumsily, a drink in each hand, out the back door.

David stood a moment on the concrete patio to accustom himself to the heat. Beside him a couple of folded lawn chairs leaned against the house. The nylon webbing of each was tattered and frayed, the ends dancing in the breeze like pennants. The girl watched him through the pale night as he set the drinks atop the burnt-out gas grill. He started to raise a hand to wave to her. A thick finger of fire began to uncurl slowly into the blue sky. Instinctively, David turned to it. A house blocked his view of the base of the flame. The building pulsed for a moment, its windows standing out white against the shadowed wall. David slapped a hand over his eyes and, in the moment before he could wrench his body away from the fire, saw the veins and bones on his hand clearly.

When he could no longer feel searing heat against his back, he opened

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his eyes and removed his hand. His eyes rolled as if in sockets lined with grit, and he blinked until moisture started to come. He found himself in a fetal crouch, and when he straightened burnt skin on his legs and arms cracked with stiffness. He became aware of Felix's whimper, but he could not see the dog in the sudden darkness. He felt along the wall until he found the open door to the garage. "Come on out, boy," he said, "it's done for now. Come on." His voice shook. The dog came through the door to meet him. David knelt beside him and Felix licked his face. David ran his hands over the dog. His vision was coming back. Felix appeared to be all right.

He turned and looked to the yard next door. He could hear the swooshing of the sprinkler. He spotted the white of the girl's T-shirt. "Are you alright?" he yelled, too loud.

After a moment her voice came quietly across the dark. "Yeah. She guesses so."

"Can you find your way over?" he asked.

"Yeah, she thinks so. Sure." The white t-shirt wafted closer. David heard her slip once in the wet garden and curse. He found one of the drinks and gulped down half of it. The ice had melted, and the gin was warm as tea. He finished it.

"Here, take this," he said when she stood beside him. She took the glass in both hands, her fingertips dry, and drank it down. The glass came back into his still outstretched hand. "Come in, I'll fix you another.

Even the little light in the breakfast nook hurt David's eyes. He turned to the girl as she came in. One cheek flushed red under her heavy tan, and a tear coursed through a film of dust. "Sit down," he said, "I'll get some towels." He made his way through the house into the bathroom, turned the tap on, and began tossing towels into the tub. He draped one over his neck and carried the others, dripping, back to the kitchen. He handed several to the girl and fixed her another drink. He risked a look out the window. Glowing cinders floated on the breeze. He ran Felix more water. He sat down at the table.

"Can you see all right?" he asked.

She removed the towel from her face. "Better now." She stared into her glass between quick gulps. David looked at her. She was small-boned and dirty up to the roots of her dishwater blonde hair. Acne ran across her cheekbones and her hairline. A slim scar lay across one eye. When she looked up he saw that her eyes were green, the scarred one rimmed in red.

"That was a bad one."

"She doesn't want to talk about it," she said. She stared so intently that David had the sensation of falling into the reddened eye.

"What do you want to talk about?"

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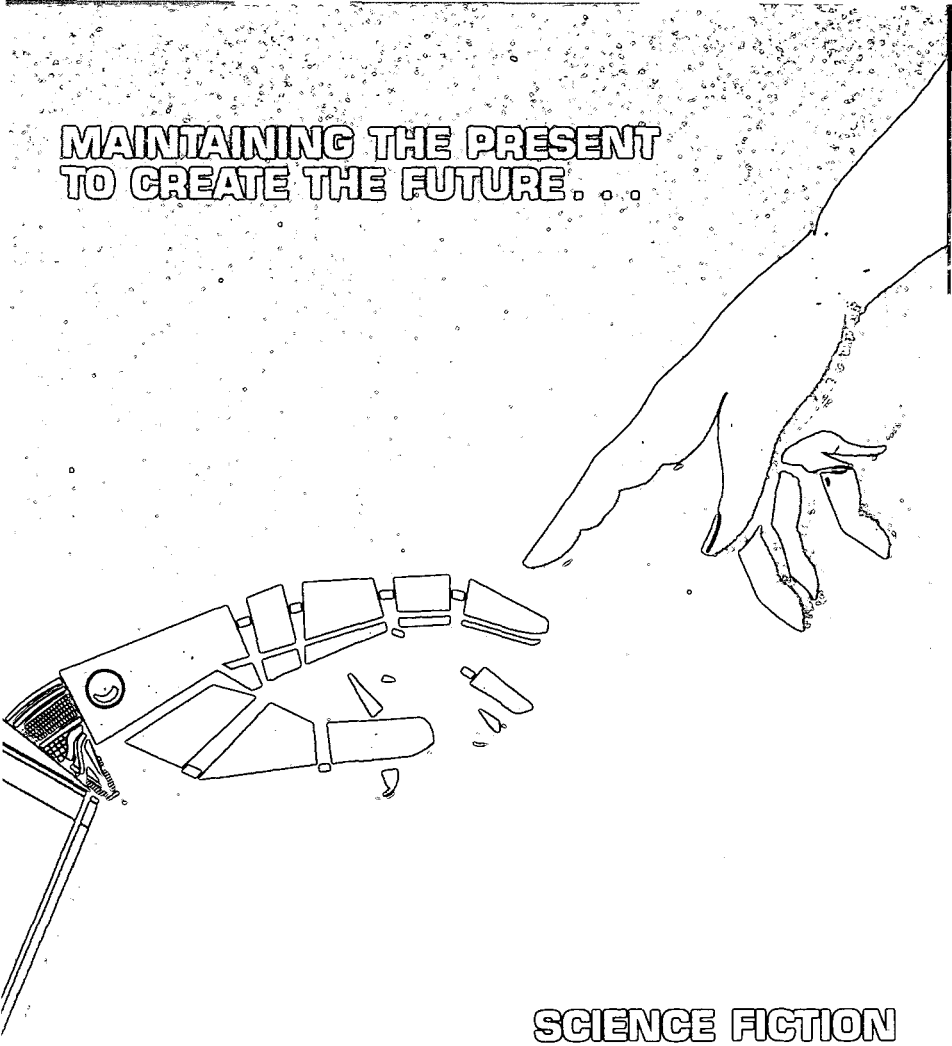

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Her expression changed to a burlesque of cunning. "They could talk about what he has in his cupboards."

"All I've got is protein. Tell you what, I'll take you out for a hamburger in a minute. Let's just see if this has settled down for the night."

"Where's the protein?"

David shook himself. He got up, came back with the blacplastic bag, the gin, and the tonic. She pulled the bag from his hand and began to shovel the green nuggets into her mouth. He fixed drinks, left the gin out of hers. When she drank, tonic water ran down her chin.

"I was on my way over with a neighborly drink when it flashed," he said. She stared at him, still chewing. He tried again. "Felix and I were going to play a little game of fetch." Her animal gaze did not change.

"Just keep him out of her garden," she said around a mouthful of food.

David chewed a nugget slowly while he studied her. "Look, do you need something? Is there anything I can do?"

She paused, puzzled. "No," she said, "She'll take the money."

"Money?" He felt stupid.

"She'll do what you want. For the money." She did not flinch. He knew it was true; he remembered seeing her hanging around Fast Food Alley.

"Where are your parents? Your mother?"

"Her mother was a see-through glastic whore."

"Was?"" She stared at him, her open mouth half-full of green paste. Her teeth were yellowed and crooked. "Is she dead?"

She began to chew again. She shrugged.

David noticed her sour odor above the smell of the protein. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Lou."

"Look, Lou, that shit isn't any good for you, no matter what the Media says. Let's go get a hamburger."

She mumbled something, shoved one last handful of protein into her already stuffed mouth. Felix followed, tail wagging. "No, you stay here," David said, closing the door.

The dog stood, listened to the garage door run up along its overhead tracks and the car start, pull out into the drive. Only when he could no longer hear the sound of the engine down the street did he start a slow, padding circuit of the house. He returned to the kitchen with its dim light, walked around his blanket once and curled down to sleep. He saw the orange-chew-soft arcing above him in over-blue and he was running, running, watching to see where it met the water-brown, and the orange bobbed out there, and he jumped and then ran again except now in the heavy-water-brown towards the bobbing-bright, and there was David's voice behind him.

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David held his left hand open to the wind his speed made. June bugs circled the few streetlamps working on 35. He met a car, honked and the car honked back.

"He has the money, doesn't he?"

He looked over. Her face was shadowed, only her legs showed by dashlight, the knees pitted and scarred. He looked to the road. "Yeah, I suppose I do." He reached in his pocket and pulled out of roll of blue bills. He rested an elbow against the wheel and peeled off a couple. He tossed the rest of the roll to her. He glanced over once to see her greedily counting it.

"If he has the money why doesn't he move Inside?"

David pulled up to a stop sign. He started to make his turn, and the Torino stalled. He turned the key and the engine cranked, then caught. Far ahead he saw the lighted signs of the Alley: Burger King, Arby's, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut. David had reasons for staying in the Suburbs, none of which adequately explained his choice, he supposed. He had a kind of independence that he knew could not be found Inside. And, too, he'd made a career in part by projecting an image that was, to Insiders, exotic. Still, he could have lived Inside and played on his ethnic and Suburban heritage to achieve the same effect. Finally, he supposed he stayed in the Suburbs despite the loneliness and discomforts because the Suburbs were his home.

"Do you know what the real name of this street is?" he asked Lou.

"Pine Heights Road," she said, quiet as a student taking a test.

"Anything strike you as strange about that?"

"No," she shrugged.

"No damn pine," he said, "no damn heights."

They drove on past block after block of houses. Here and there a light burned. They met more cars, some with one headlight, most with none. David honked at each of them.

"May she help him?" the tiny girl behind the counter asked. The uniform meant as a short smock she wore as a dress. David guessed she was no more than ten. He returned the smile, looked up at the lighted menu above, though he knew it by heart. "Yes, please. Two quarter-pounders with cheese, two large fries, two chocolate shakes," he said. His mouth began to water. This is one reason to stay, he thought, the food.

"She's sorry, sir, there's no cheese tonight."

He shook his head. "No problem."

"To stay or to go, sir?"

David glanced around the deserted dining area. The windows to the

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west were covered with sheets of plywood. Lou waited at a table. "I'm with her." He nodded in Lou's direction.

"To stay, then." Her smile abruptly vanished, and she moved away quickly to start his order. David was surprised by the sudden change. He wondered how much she saw of Lou or of sitters generally. Enough, he thought, in a place like this.

Feldon waved as he passed behind the grill and fryers. David waved back, smiled. He read the graffiti spray-painted on the walls, the ancient molded-plastic furniture, even the windows. Almost every graduating class of the last twenty years was represented. One of the prices, David thought, the merchants pay for being so close to the Government Complex. A mop stood in a pail in one darkened corner. The door was stopped open with a cinder block. He could smell their food cooking.

The girl said something to him. He handed her the remaining bills. "Keep the change," he said.

"Thank him, but no tipping allowed." The old register wheezed. David guessed it was the only one in the line that still worked. She counted out the glastic coins into his palms. She turned, gathered up his order and placed it on a tray. She slid it across the scarred aluminum counter. "Enjoy his meal, sir." She turned and began to scrape the grill. David took his time getting plastic straws and paper napkins from their dispensers. When he turned to walk to Lou he left a neat pile of change on the counter.

Lou ate with a single-mindedness that saddened David. Finishing the revisions had made him act, more than anything else, as if he lived in the world his parents had told stories about. He'd started over to her with drinks, as if he had slipped back to a time before the end of the world was in sight, to before the Fall, even, when neighborliness was a way of life. Watching Lou eat, chewing his own food slowly, he recalled an image of his father towering above him, on his head a funny, puffy hat and around him an apron with graffiti on it. Hamburgers and real steaks sizzled on a grill, and people filled the backyard with shouts and laughter. Brightly colored plasdiscs sailed through the air. He remembered, could almost remember, the smell of beer.

After the Fall no one laughed much. David's mind fixed on the image of his mother's face, the pronounced lines of worry, the exhausted eyes fixed on an invisible point somewhere beyond his seeing. David fought against tears that blurred the portrait. While their neighbors had left in droves for the Inside, where, they had heard, a new order was being built, or Out There, where, it was said, one could grow his own food, his parents and a few like-thinkers fought to stabilize their neighborhood. David remembered those late night confabs in their house. He'd sit quietly at the edge of the dome of light cast by the kerosene lantern. He

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remembered clearly the night Preacher had returned from Inside with their first accurate information and, another time, his mother's plan for re-establishing electrical service. That must have been years later, David thought. Later, still, they had gotten him a university scholarship Inside. By the time he had finished school both of his parents had died.

David thought that that was for the best, that the renegade world that had evolved in the Suburbs would have horrified them. Outings to the Suburbs had become a popular weekend entertainment for young Insiders, and a service economy had developed to pander to their desires. David had lived as a scout himself for more than a decade, had ferried Insiders in his car for nights of fast-food, drive-ins and lounges, often cruising to pick up sitters before heading for a motel. His parents would have been ashamed of their son.

Lou finished her fries and looked up. David pushed what remained of his across the table to her and turned to look out the window. All of that was over now, though. Since the sun had started to burn up Insiders no longer had time for fun. David was bewildered by how hard they all still worked, and he knew that he had worked just as hard. The exhausted face he saw reflected in the plate glass window could be his mother's.

He turned back to Lou. He had started over to her garden hoping to make a friend. Instead, he had given her money and would spend one of his last nights on earth with a prostitute whose age he could not bring himself to guess.

"His is a nice car." Lou had her fingers spread across the dash in front of her.

"It needs a tune-up."

"Her boy had an Omega."

"What happened? Couldn't find parts?"

"No, he took it with him. He went Out There," she nodded to the distance, past the blocks of houses, to where the blue lightning flared.

"When was that?" When they passed a still working streetlamp he took his eyes from the road to look at her profile.

"Oh, like a year ago."

"You haven't heard from him?" She didn't answer. David knew it was a dumb question. The government had tried, of course, to find out what was going on Out There, but, according to Media, it hadn't had much luck. David had once thought of writing a book on Out There and Tella-Dotun had arranged for him to use a friend's security clearance and access code to monitor a series of government reports. Reconnaissance aircraft had taken photos showing small acreages under cultivation and, usually, close by, buildings that appeared inhabited. Ministry of State anthropologists, bilingual and unarmed, had been sent out several times.

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None of the expeditions had returned. Military patrols had scouted the populated areas, but the villagers had fled as soon as they sighted the Land Rovers. The commanders-in-the-field had not wished to confirm the villagers' fears by chasing after them. Examination of articles in the homes suggested that the inhabitants were Hispanic emigrees from the time of the Latin Wars, which of course was what had been predicted.

Ministry agents had also infiltrated the Suburban fast food chains, operating on the inescapable deduction that the beef and dairy products they served came from Out There. Though the agents found out surprisingly little that could be verified, they hypothesized the existence of small, nomadic bands who provided the meat, which they harvested at will from the herds that dominated Out There. The cheese and milk, the agents further hypothesized, were bartered for, or looted from, the Hispanic villagers by the Anglo bands and delivered to the Suburbs through an elaborate black market. The report had concluded that there was no reason to believe that either the Ministerial expeditions or the suburbanites who had fled Out There after the Fall had been "absorbed."

"I'm sorry, Lou." He pulled the Torino into the driveway.

She shrugged. "No big deal." He saw that her eyes were still on the horizon. In a moment she said, "What's he want it to be, Mister?"

"He'd like to be called David," he said, and, "What about a movie?"

"I don't think you two have been properly introduced. Lou, this is Felix. Felix, this is Lou." David stood, his hand still on the doorknob.

Lou came in behind him. "Will he bite?" Lou asked. A lot of people were afraid of dogs because of the wild packs. Still, David thought the fear of domestic animals inordinate.

"Not you," he said.

Lou approached Felix with one hand extended. "Puppy, puppy, oh, puppy," she crooned. "Come here, puppy." Felix stood his ground.

"He's no puppy. That dog's at least twenty years old."

Lou had the dog's head in her arms, was already kneeling beside him. Felix stared helplessly at David. "Puppy, puppy," Lou crooned.

David walked through the house to the study. He sat down, called up a movie and routed it to the big screen in the bedroom. The pale message box flashed from the upper corner of the screen. He was not surprised that Tella-Dotun had already gone through the revisions. He punched a few buttons to block the signal from the bedroom screen.

David stared at the ceiling, hands beneath his head. The sheets clung to his skin. He felt good when he didn't think. Lou sat at the head of the bed in a half-lotus, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her

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palms. Her hair was still damp at the neck from her shower. David could count each vertebra of her spine. Credits rolled up the screen.

"Why do the casters call it film?" she asked without taking her eyes from the screen.

He roused himself, looked at the screen. "Oh, film was what they used to record on, a kind of plastic. Like in cameras." He rolled onto his side, cupped his chin in his hand and looked at her. The set of her eyes told him he'd gone too far too fast. "A camera was used to take stills, photographs, first. Then they found a way of moving the film so that it made movies." He nodded towards the screen, where the last of the credits were just disappearing. "That movie there was first recorded on film."

"She's sorry she asked." Lou stared at the now blank screen.

He lay again on his back. After awhile he said, "Do you want to spend the night?"

"Whatever the customer wants."

"No, whatever you want. You decide."

She turned to him, her look suddenly coy. "Why is the sun doing that?" she asked.

"You watch the Media?"

"At first. They're just guessing. They don't know."

"No, and neither do I. Nobody does." He thought for a moment. "And they can't stop it."

She dropped her gaze. David watched her fists clench until her knuckles gleamed white. She looked up. "What's going to happen?"

David rubbed a hand over his eyes to block out the images in his mind. He'd listened, like everyone, to the Media's hired experts, watched the specials, hours of them. He knew what all the technical talk came down to. He looked at her. "Maybe just a big bang and it'll be over."

Lou cried quietly. David sat up and tried to put an arm over her shoulders. She shook him off, looked into his eyes, and clapped her hands to the sides of his head. He was startled at how tightly she held him. Her face was very close to his and with a sob for each word, she squeezed out, "And maybe what?"

He felt her breath on his face. "And maybe, probably, as gradual as it's been so far. . . ." He could not think of another word. Not sure she'd understand, he said, "Firestorms."

She held his face for another moment or two, then dropped her hands. She had stopped crying very suddenly. She turned away from him. "Oh," she said, and then, "Maybe she likes that better." He lay down and pulled her into the cradle of his arm as he did so. She resisted only a little.

Her breathing was steady. He stared at the ceiling. He asked, "Would you like to see another movie?"

"She doesn't understand a lot of what happened before."

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David said nothing.

David stood in the open garage door, enjoying a Pepsi, taking in the mid-morning sun without looking at it. Beyond the two dozen or so junkers that dotted the wide asphalt apron that had once served the now abandoned K-Mart he could see the back of the Burger Barn. Feldon came around the corner of the Barn with a blacplastic bag of garbage in each hand. He tossed them on the heap that overflowed from a lidless dumpster. David waved, but Feldon didn't look his way. McGee was bent over the fender of one of the junkers, only his hips and legs visible to David. David drained the last from his glastic bottle, burnt skin crinkling as he arched his neck. He looked to the sun. His glasses mixed a green tint into the sun's colors. The core, two-thirds now of the sun, half again as big as the last time David had dared to look, pulsed dark red. Concentric rims of orange, yellow, ivory and white led to the perimeter. Finally, the blue fingers of fire curled up from the surface into space in a slow ballet. David looked down to the asphalt. Bright spots swam before his eyes. He could feel the stiff sunburn on his cheeks. He hoped, irrelevantly, that his retinas were all right.

McGee walked past him into the dark interior of the garage, looking at the resistor end of a sparkplug. David turned and followed, dropping his empty into the antique wooden crate by the machine as he passed. McGee's head and shoulders disappeared under the hood of David's Torino.

"I picked the best three I had. They ought to do you." His voice was muffled. "I filed them up. They should run you a year."

"You think we got a year, McGee?"

McGee brought his head out, stared at David a moment, then beyond, out the garage door, to where light glanced off the asphalt. He shook his head from side to side slowly. His face broadened in a grin. "Not a snowball's chance in hell." He stuck his head back under the hood. "What do you college boys figure?"

"All I know is what I see on the Media."

McGee worked a minute. Except for the rachet of his wrench all was silent. "But what do you figure?" he said to the Torino's engine.

David shrugged, turned half away from McGee's back. "Nobody knows, from what they say."

"They ever lie to you before?"

"Probably, but I think they're pretty straight about this. If they knew, anybody who'd care to turn on a screen would know. If they're going to lie to us, they'd tell us they had it figured out, invent some science that we couldn't understand. But what would the point be?"

"Keep all the folks Inside stroking?"

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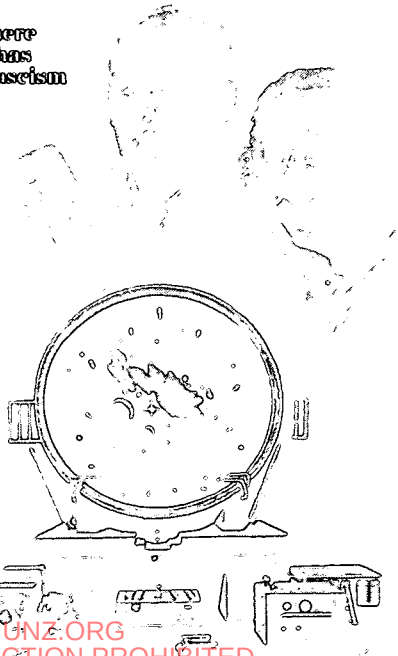

A BANTAM SPECTRA HARDCOVER

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"Maybe. But the Insiders I know have written it all off, and they're still stroking. And so are you, McGee."

McGee pulled his head out, shot a quick grin at David, went back under.

"What do you figure?" David asked.

"What I figure is this," McGee said after a moment, "the way the sun is acting we're going to burn up or freeze out pretty soon. If we can stand the temperatures, which maybe we can if we pay attention to when we go out, the ecosystem's still going to start shaking like a bitch in heat. The energy drain for the food systems on the Inside'll be too much. All those efficiency spaces are going to demand lots of energy for cooling or heating or both, depending on what the climate does. Mass transit'll have to be shut down." He stopped, grunted as he set a plug, went on, "What I figure is we got anything from ten seconds to a couple of months before that thing either sucks us in for fuel, sputters out like a used-up candle, or blows our atoms out into the universe. It'd be good if it happens faster than our brains can register it, is what I figure."

David stared for a moment, then smiled. "Well, that's a load off my mind," he said.

McGee looked up. "What I can't figure is why they haven't announced the Rescue Effort yet. Anybody with two millimeters of sense can figure that they're going to try something." When David didn't answer McGee shrugged and went back to work.

David wandered over to the open door. McGee's mention of the rescue effort about which the Media constantly speculated made him queasy. Across the asphalt a pack of fifteen or twenty dogs had gathered around Feldon's dumpster, dragging garbage bags down from the heap and tearing them open.

David hurried back to the Torino, leaned into the open passenger's side window, flipped open the glove box, pulled out a revolver and a box of shells. "Get your gun, McGee," he said. "We're going to do someone a favor." Without waiting, he started to march across the asphalt.

"Do someone a what did you say?" McGee asked his back.

David quickly checked the load in the gun as he walked, then kept his eyes on the dogs, none of which had yet noticed him. He stuck the gun in his belt, dumped the contents of the box into his right palm, then dropped the shells into his pocket. He flipped the box away. He tried not to ask himself why he was getting involved. He was within twenty meters when the first dog looked up at him. It bared its fangs and growled deep in its throat. David stopped, lifted the revolver and shot it in the head.

The heads of the remaining animals jerked around to him with the sound of the gun. When he shot the second animal, the pack began to move away from the garbage out onto the asphalt. He shot a third as

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they moved in an unpanicked trot towards the corner of the Burger Barn. David heard the solid crack of McGee's rifle behind him. Another dog went down with a quick bark. The pack broke into a run and started to disappear around the corner of the building. A shotgun boomed, and the leaders moved out across the open asphalt towards the deserted K-Mart a hundred meters away, now at a dead run. David took his time and shot two more dogs. Three, bunched up at the rear of the pack, went down in a furry, yelping ball when the shotgun again sounded. The remaining dogs had lined out in their run. McGee fired three times more, each time making a space in the string of running dogs. David took his time, chose to use the last round in the cylinder on a long-tailed, short-haired dog toward the front of the line. It was big, muscular, the best physical specimen in range. Its back legs went out from under it, and it rolled over twice, got to its front feet, and, yelping and whining, began to spin after its tail.

The rest were gone, either into or around the K-Mart, David hadn't noticed. Feldon came around the corner of the Barn, stopped a few meters from the three dogs he'd shot at close range. One was still on its feet, bleeding and barking. Feldon shifted his shotgun into his left hand, drew a short pistol from beneath his apron and shot the dog in mid-bark. David walked carefully among the dead dogs, punching out spent cartridges and reloading as he went. He didn't take his eyes from the dog, some kind of Shepherd-Doberman cross, he thought. He walked to where the dog spun, snapping at the wound in its hip, kicked it in its side, and, when the dog straightened out, shot it in the head. He transferred the revolver to his left hand. His right trembled, and he felt that he might vomit.

They sat on the asphalt in the shade of the Burger Barn's eave, eating hamburgers. Across the apron flies buzzed around the dead dogs piled in the back of McGee's pickup. McGee finished his hamburger, pulled the bill of his cap down, and leaned back against the wall. David popped the last bite in his mouth, chewed, swallowed. "Where do you get this stuff?" he asked.

"The same place I get these." Feldon held out a cigarette to David. David took it, caught himself looking around, shook his head at his own irrelevant anxieties. He hadn't seen any sign of the Law in a month. He lit the cigarette on Feldon's match, inhaled smoke into his lungs.

"And where's that?"

"Oh, the chain provides it all. Once a year or so it gets to be my turn to pick it up. Me and a rep from each of the other chains take company trucks Out There. There's a place."

Feldon looked at him through blue cigarette smoke, glanced very

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quickly at the sun pulsing in the sky, shrugged. "You want to know all about it?" David nodded. "Well, there's a road that leads Out There. It's pretty broken up. You follow it left and then right and then left again toward the river. It takes the better part of a day, maybe a hundred-fifty, two hundred kilometers. Down under the trees in the river valley there's a place called the Yarz. You pay them, they separate out what you want, cut their throats and skin them. We pick up the carcasses, cover them up with blacplastic and head like hell for home before the meat spoils. We grind it up to hamburger. All the chains share this big freezer out on 35 near the fuel tanks."

When he didn't go on, David said, "Must really be something to see."

"Man, there ain't nothing else like it in the real world." Feldon was staring off toward the dead dogs. "Real Old Westy, you know. They climb up on those horses and ride in among the animals like it was the most natural thing in the world. The butchers and skinners are red from blood, just grinning away like they were watching a movie. Hell, they'll be butchering an animal, and they'll just reach in, pull out the heart and take a bite, like an Insider eating a peach for dessert." He turned his face to David. "That's what they live on, mostly, you know. Organs, the tongue. They eat the organs right out of an animal."

"Where do they get the animals?"

Feldon turned his eyes away. "That I don't know for sure, but I think they just grow wild Out There. These Rounders, that's what they call themselves, they'll go out on a drive, what they call it. I think what happens is they find a herd of animals and chase them down to the Yarz. Then they just keep them there until somebody comes for them."

David thought about what Feldon had said. The language sounded vaguely familiar from his university courses in period literature. "What do they do with the money?" he asked.

Feldon shook his head and grinned. "Maybe they use it to buy stuff off each other. I don't know. My theory is they'd sell you meat for bumper jacks if that's what you had to exchange."

"What about the rest of the stuff, the dairy stuff?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure the rounders trade for that with villagers Out There, probably beef. There's always a few Hispanics running with them. Hell, you hear as much Spanish as English. I heard once the real cheese and milk comes from goats, and I imagine the villagers raise the tobacco, too." He paused, smiled. "Hell, you can get marijuana Out There, if you want to take the risk. I tried it once, made me nervous. I like tobacco better. Besides, I didn't want to get addicted. You see, they got these little stores down around the Yarz, and people will throw up a tent made out of blacplastic or even skins. You just go in and see what they have

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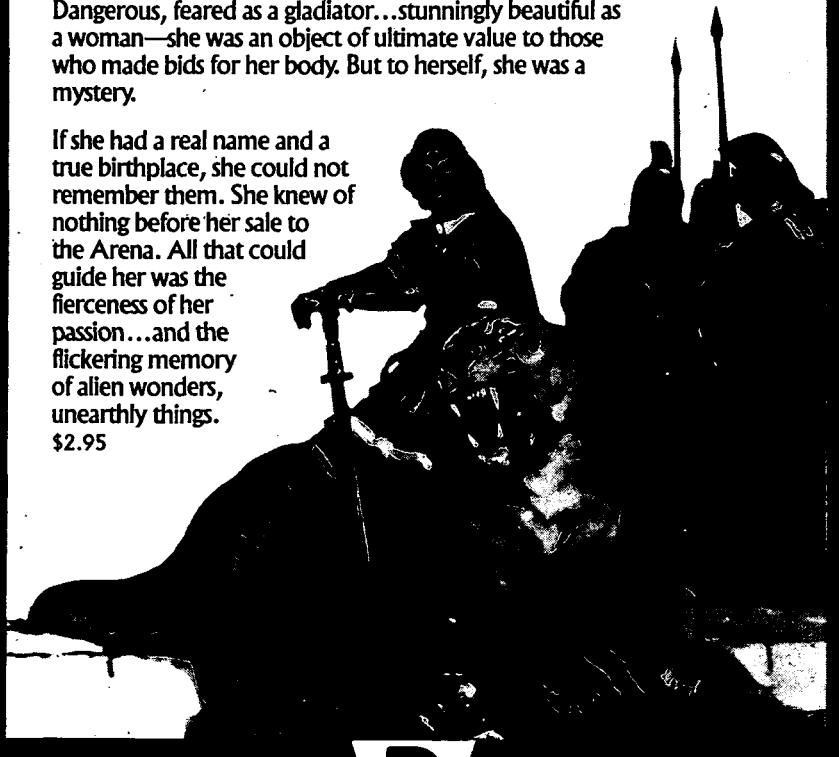

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to offer. Mostly women run them. It looks to me like the whole place used to be a town. Lots of foundations sticking out of the ground."

"Is that what happens when people go Out There, they farm or become Rounders?"

"No," Feldon shook his head. "That I do know. We sneaked a guy back in with us once. We found him on the way back. He was almost dead. He'd left the Suburbs a week before with a big group, a dozen altogether. They'd been shot at by the villagers, run down by the Rounders. The rest of them were dead, the kid said, at least the ones he knew about, which were all but a couple. Hell, they couldn't find anything to eat."

He shook his head again, then continued. "No, those Rounders are wild, all right. Those are the folks who never came in, them and their children."

McGee sputtered and straightened to stretch. Feldon looked at him, then glanced up. He held his gaze on the sun. With one hand he tossed his apron aside, reached into a pocket. His hand came out with a small box of cigarettes. "Take it," he said. "I'm grateful for the . . ." He trailed off, looking for the right word. Finally, he said again, "I'm grateful."

3. To Tell The Story

Lou waited in the shadow of the front of the house with Felix. David pulled into the drive, got out to open the garage door. Instead of running to greet him as David expected, Felix sat patiently beside Lou. Lou absently petted him and stared at David. "How're you two doing?" he asked. Her expression didn't change. David opened the door, ran the car in. He came back through the house with drinks.

Lou took hers when he handed it to her. He sat down on the step beside her. She said, "She thought he wasn't coming back."

"It took longer than I expected." He hesitated. "There were dogs."

"Oh," she said.

They sat in silence, Lou stroking Felix and sipping her drink. David thought again of Tella-Dotun.

"Does David want to sit in back?" Lou asked.

David shook his head. "No, it's too dangerous now. We've got some shelter here."

"Okay," she said.

"Look," he said after awhile, "I have to check my mail. I'll be back."

"Okay," she said.

David went into the house, made his way into his study, sat down. The red rectangle still flashed. When he hit the "respond" button, the screen read again "Please Wait." Damn it, he thought, and found a cigarette

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and matches. The screen brightened. Tella-Dotun sat there, the lines of her back and shoulders squared.

"I hoped you would call last night." She looked very tired. The yellow and blue facepaint failed to cover the puffy skin under her eyes.

David sipped his drink and took a hit from his cigarette. "I needed a party," he grinned.

Her jaw dropped slightly. She regained her composure. "This is stupid, David, very stupid. If we're being monitored you'll be without a code."

"Now, Tella, are you going to tell me the government's wasting its time monitoring me? Besides, didn't you ever flirt with the wild side?".

Tella-Dotun's eyes brightened, though her face remained stern. "No, I won't tell you that, but I suggest you might try to grow up."

"No time like the present," he said, raising his glass to her.

"Yours is not the only project I'm trying to get out, you know."

"Sorry, Tella." He stubbed out the cigarette and moved the ashtray away from the screen without taking his eyes from hers. "Really."

She glanced down at what David assumed were printouts. She looked back to him. "The book is fine, David, very fine. I've shown it around. Everyone agrees, it's a masterpiece."

"Kind of a tough time to make that sort of judgment, don't you think?"

Tella-Dotun shrugged. "Maybe a better time than any other." He found himself falling into those very tired brown eyes. She continued. "And, that's what I do, after all, make that sort of judgment."

"Will it be out in time?"

She shrugged again. "The holographs are running all the time. We don't do much with format. It'll only take a couple of days, maybe less, depending on when the print shop works it in. We'll send copies to Home Base for you to take with you." She paused. "They've assigned you a number."

David waited. He was not at all sure he wished to know it.

Tella-Dotun shifted through the printouts before her. She lifted one off the keyboard. It was very white in her brown hands. "Do you want to write this down?"

David shook his head. "First," he said, "tell me something. Why me?"

Tella-Dotun sighed, lowered the paper. "We nominated you, the screening committee gave you a number." She drummed her fingers against her notes. "Why do you find it so impossible to believe? You represent a cultural constituency. It's a small constituency, but one that, I think, deserves to have its story told." Her hands appeared in front of her on the screen. They wrestled the cap off a glastic prescription bottle. She popped a tablet in her mouth, washed it down with something from a large ornate mug. "Now, do you want your number?"

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David nodded. His mouth was dry. He didn't ask to whom she thought he'd be telling his story.

Tella-Dotun kept her eyes on the note. "Okay, it's 1-0-0-9-2." She looked up, waited for his reaction.

David showed none for a full thirty seconds. He felt something, then, welling up in him, a giddiness. He laughed. He thought he should control himself, and that thought struck him as hilarious. He laughed harder, huge, slow chortles that came from deep within. He threw himself back in his chair, bounced forward, threw himself back again. He laughed and laughed.

He sobered with a long sigh, wiped a tear from beneath his eye. Tella-Dotun wore her stern expression, and it was only the exhaustion in her eyes that stopped another outburst. "I'm sorry," David said as meekly as he could.

Tella-Dotun closed her eyes, rubbed them, stared at David. "What in the hell is so goddamned funny?" she said with more feeling than David had ever seen her display.

He thought about mentioning the Government Monitor to her, refrained. "Sorry, Tella, I was only thinking: Ten thousand some odd. So much for the creator of a masterpiece."

"Look," she said, unappeased, "a lot of people, I among them, worked very hard to get a number that low for you. I mean, David, there are physicists, chemists, social scientists, other artists, technicians, food supply specialists, energy people; representatives of every culture, Moscovites, Liverpudlians, Athenians, Cantonese, Delhians, Buenos Airians, Lagosians." She sputtered to a stop, started again. "David, where do you think you'd be if the politicians and the military hadn't opted out?"

"A captain and his ship."

"What?"

"Oh, it's something I found among my father's papers once, on an old-fashioned carbon. He used it in reference to the presidency in the old order, his sense of bravado."

"That's the old order, David. These people made a very brave decision."

"Yes, I'm sure. Look, what about the primitives from Out There? Are any of them going?"

Tella-Dotun was startled. "No, of course not. Anybody who tries to make contact is shot at or run away from. Why in the world do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Well, you said 'every culture.' "

"David, what's Out There is hardly a culture."

David shrugged. "Perhaps only slightly less civilized than the Suburbs. It's just a matter of degree."

"I hardly think so." David did not persist. Tella-Dotun looked again

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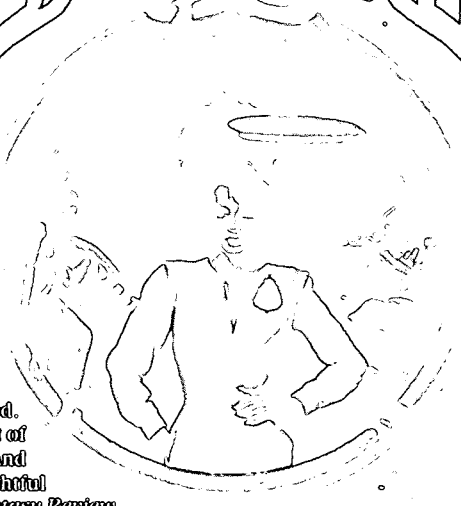

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A BANTAM SPECTRA BOOK

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to her printouts. "There are just two more things. One, your orientation date's been set for tomorrow."

David stiffened. "Okay," he said.

"And, two, it's local. There are enough selectees there. Rather than transmat you to Home Base, the orientation team will transmat there."

A moment passed. David said, "Then I won't see you again."

"It's highly unlikely."

David leaned forward in his chair and placed a fingertip to the screen. "I'm sorry for that."

Tella-Dotun placed a finger against the image of his. "Tomorrow, noon, the Holiday Inn."

"Good-bye, Tella." He thought he might cry, wished he could. He thought he could see a tear smudging the yellow paint beneath her eye.

"Good-bye, David, and thank you."

Before he could respond she had hung up. He stared at the blank screen.

After awhile, he stood and walked through the house and out the front door. He sat down beside Lou. Felix was coming back in the blue twilight, the orange ball in his mouth. Lou said, "He was gone a long time."

"I had to put some things in order." He took the ball from Felix and threw it across the street. Felix trotted after it, too old to really run now. He picked it up and came back even more slowly. David threw the ball again.

"I have to go Inside tomorrow." When Lou said nothing, he added, "I'd like you to stay here, take care of Felix."

"Will he come back?" David glanced at her. The pale light glinted in her green eyes.

"Yes. The day after tomorrow." He draped an arm over her shoulders, pulled her close. She resisted for only a moment.

Felix lay down at their feet, the orange ball trapped between his front paws. Soon they could hear his light snoring. They watched the moon come up over the abandoned houses across the street. It rose gently, full, scarred and cement-gray.

"She heard David before. Laughing."

"Yes. He thinks he may be going insane."

4. Deus Ex Machina

David turned left off 35, powered through the Alley, hit fourth, settled back and relaxed. It was good to be on the move early in the morning. The overcast to the east flickered yellow and red. David tried not to think of the cause, just the colors.

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It wasn't any use. David was sure he knew everything he needed to know about transmatation. Two of his university roommates had majored in physics with specializations in transmatation technology, another had paid for his tuition working as an inter-city commerce courier. Transmatation promised a new age then, and the brightest, most adventuresome students were caught up with the fervor of revolutionaries. All had stayed in touch for years. David had never really gotten used to their romanticism, and he'd certainly never wanted to be disassembled atom by atom till he was a chain miles long traveling at the speed of light. To travel and see the world was all his roommates had dreamed of. Nights in school, David dreamed of home.

And when they did call, he knew immediately that it was to show off some new scar they wore like a badge, a ragged hairline or a creased skull from premature transmatation, separated cartilage or skin damage from sun spot interference, a missing toe from incomplete reception. And they always insisted on using the screen, despite the extra cost, so that David could be suitably impressed. They'd haul up their shirts, drop their trousers or place a callused four-toed foot half a meter from his nose. Sunspot interference. The horror stories about so-and-so, one colleague or another, who looked perfectly fine on reception, except she couldn't hear, or couldn't think beyond some primary-level spelling or addition. Or the transmatter could remember pages of the most difficult text university had ever presented him, maybe the entirety of Frost's poetry, replete with archaic rural rhythms and accents, but not his own name. Or maybe the cranium was as empty as a child's rattle, and she'd stand for thirty seconds in the transmatation booth before collapsing. Oh, these transmatters saw themselves as modern buccaneers. They would talk to him for hours of the latest technical advances, how it was getting so safe that soon even little children would be transmatted, though they never said why little children should be transmatted. Yes, David knew all he needed to know about transmatation—he knew the odds.

He pulled the Torino around the curl that led off the Alley and onto the Kennedy expressway. He glanced to his right and below at the cemetery, then beyond to the Government Complex with its Consolidated School, its Public Hospital and its Cop Shop. The car climbed smoothly, and David felt a brief happiness about McGee's work that chased away for the moment his anxiety. At the top he slowed, then stopped the car, its bumper almost touching the barrier. He got out and stretched, grabbed his bag out of the back seat and lugged it to the meter. He dropped coins into the slot until the small screen read 36 hours. The view of Inside caught his eye. He placed both palms against the meter-high pressed plastic curb and leaned forward.

Only enough of the expressway remained opposite to provide a platform

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and twin rails for the el which now made its way towards him. Where the road had been, glass-sided buildings gleamed, despite the overcast. To the south the river ran yellow, and on its near bank he could see white adobe walls, the red and green tiled roofs of modular efficiency spaces. David's gaze followed the river till it disappeared into the haze of the horizon. He looked into his upturned palms and fought the urge to bury his face in them.

He grabbed his bag and walked Inside, nodding to the monitor screen as he passed. He walked across the platform as the el glided to a halt. He stepped through the automatic doors onto the deep carpet of the cell floor. As far as he could see in either direction the el was deserted. The Media gave the local news over the screen at one end of the cell, and the screen opposite illustrated a long list of prohibited activities with animated cartoons. The Media caster made no mention of the sun. David marveled at the quiet of the cell, its sparkling cleanness. General Media interrupted with an update of the day's big story. The Rescue Effort had been announced that morning. David felt his heart rate increase and reached a sweaty hand into his pocket for the cigarettes Feldon had given him. He noticed the Law making her way through the cells toward him. He promised himself to keep in mind how it was Inside. He brought his hand out empty. The Law nodded and made her way into the next cell. David stared out the small window opposite him, watching the green tops of trees and glass sides of buildings fly past. Then he saw it. Written in a neat hand despite the spray paint on the otherwise unblemished opposite wall of the cell were the words "The End Is Near."

David made his way down the mall towards the Holiday Inn. His bag made him self-conscious. He concentrated on the screen at the corner which alternated the time, the temperature, and the names of the walks intersecting there. It was only nine o'clock, a good hour before the normal workday began, but already the mall was filled with people dressed in business uniforms. David went through the revolving door and into the lobby of the Inn. He stopped, taken aback, as always, by the opulence of Inside. The carpet beneath his sandals was thick. The whole of the wide, deep lobby was tastefully lit. Thickly padded chairs and lounges were scattered about. David recognized the canvases of several well known artists. The desk was fifteen meters long and apparently of real wood.

"I'll take that for you, sir." David let the bag go into the hand of the bellhop and followed him towards the desk. Without his bag and with his eye on the small man's neatly creased red and green coveralls, David was suddenly aware of how shabby he must look. The comfortable old

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denim that seemed so practical in the Suburbs now bound and chafed him.

The clerk looked up smiling. He touched the tip of his little finger to the end of his painted eyebrow. "You have a reservation for me, I think," David said, handing over his Card.

The clerk inserted the Card into a slot and glanced at a tiny screen. "Oh, yes, sir. Of course." He turned to the hop. "Meshaak, take Mr. Jones' luggage to ten-o-one. I'll escort Mr. Jones there myself directly." He touched the same eyebrow and turned back to David. "We're pleased to have you, sir. My name is Willow. If there's anything you need just ask for me. The Red Cross orientation will be conducted in the King room, just down that corridor there, sir." He handed David his Card and leaned over the desk to whisper conspiratorily, "We just heard it on the Media this morning. It *is* the Rescue Effort, isn't it, Mr. Jones?" Willow's eyes begged. David found himself nodding. Willow whisked through an invisible door in the desk. "Oh, I knew it. I dreamed it last night, in fact. Mr. Jones, I'd like to congratulate you." He extended a green-painted hand.

David shook it.

"Qué pasa, hombre?" David let the knob slip from his hand and stared at the woman standing there, legs spread, filling the door. LaMer had her hand out, but David brushed it away, grabbed her in a bear hug and lifted her from the floor. He set her down and gazed at her. Beneath her pompadour the hairline showed a network of tiny scars. A red eyepatch of iridescent material covered her left eye. The right eye was sky-blue, and a single, narrow stripe of the same color ran down her forehead and nose, over her chin, down into the open collar of her blouse. He stepped back to look at her. A glastic rod exited the pantleg where her right foot should have been.

"You look great, roomie, what's left of you," he said and picked her up again. The ribs under his spread fingers, her breasts pressing against his chest felt real enough. "God, it's great to find someone, something," he said into her ear. He sighed and put her down, stepped back. Her arms fell slowly from around his neck.

David and LaMer stood smiling. Then, she feinted with her left and punched him hard in the shoulder with her right. He stumbled back out of the doorway. LaMer strode past him, looking around as she did, saying, "About time you invited me in. Where the hell were you raised, the frigging suburbs? You don't have the manners Allah gave a pig." She walked around the sitting room with only a negligible limp and then into the bedroom, shouting insults, from the tone of her banter, in, from what David could make out, three languages other than English. David

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stood by the door, stupidly grinning. LaMer came back to the bedroom door, leaned a shoulder against the frame, placed a hand on one jutting hip.

"It's good to see you, trash."

David walked over to stand close to her. The muscles in his cheeks ached from grinning. "You're here," he said, "for the orientation."

LaMer reached slowly out to him, caught David's earlobe between her thumb and forefinger and began to massage it. "I don't know why everyone says you're so stupid." And then, "My confrere will explain it all to the three suits and the child prodigy downstairs, as well as their assorted bloody dependents." She let her hand slip to the back of David's neck. "Me, I've done twenty bloody orientations, and I'm in bloody need of a frigging break." She brought his head to her and kissed him. Her tongue made a slow electric curl down towards the root of his soul. "Baby," she said, "I'm your orientation."

David tried to raise himself, but LaMer clapped her hands to his shoulders. "Stay put, damn it," she mumbled. She lifted herself smoothly and slowly, came down with force upon him. He squeezed the flesh of her hips, and she rose again. The observer in David retreated, and, camera-like, began to record images—the rivulet of sweat that meandered down from her temple; the flutter of the half-closed eyelid, the white half-moon that shone below; the thin lips pulled straight as the line of small teeth exposed between; the sheen of her shoulders back-lit by the light through the open bedroom door; the flush on her belly bisected by the straight blue line; her thighs white against his tan; the odd vacancy where her right foot should have been; the growing and shrinking distance between them. LaMer quickened her rhythm, stopped, started and swore. Her tongue pulsed out over her upper lip, snake-like. She swore again, shuddered and, with a groan, fell foward on top of David.Her breath was hot against his cheek and smelled sweet as fresh water. In a moment they both slept.

"Bloody damn!" LaMer exhaled. "This is too good to be legal." She handed the bottle over to David.

"It's not." He took the bottle and pulled on it, sank deeper into the pillows propped behind him. "I got it from a guy who got it Out There from some primitive store."

"Really?" LaMer settled closer against David. "Well, I've had tequila before, always synthesized, you know." She rubbed the inside of his thigh absently. "You know, I told them they were making a bloody big mistake not sending a couple of primitives." David sat up straighter, watched LaMer in profile. Her face and voice were somber. "Most of the trans-

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matters thought so, but the screening committee told us that policy was not made by technicians, and that furthermore you don't kidnap people."

"Why do you say that, that somebody from Out There ought to go?"

"I'm not sure. It's hard to explain." She took the bottle out of his hand and tipped it up. She swallowed twice, held the bottle in her lap. "Your average Insider is a little too goddamn perfect. It's like they gave up something for that perfection, traded something. I don't know what it is, but it's like they all were received at the end of transmatation without something they started with. Like a foot—" she nodded in the direction of her own missing foot "—but something in the spirit." She looked down, embarrassed. "I guess that's your specialty, though."

In the quiet David could hear the hum of air conditioning. The bottle passed back and forth.

After awhile LaMer asked, her speech slightly slurred, "Want to see my leg walk itself?"

"What?" he giggled. "Sure."

"You always would believe anything anybody told you, you—you yuppie."

"That's an exinct bird, like a dodo." He thought very hard. "You mean guppy."

"Do I?"

David took another pull. "Boy, like my grandfather said, this'll put lead in your pencil."

"Your grandfather? You remember him?" She took the bottle back.

"I remember him saying that. That's about all."

"What's it mean?"

"I don't know for sure. He just said it once."

LaMer shook her head. He took the bottle.

They were quiet a moment. Then LaMer said, "Lead in your what? Why would you want lead in it?"

David choked on the tequila, started to cough. Some of the liquor came up through his nose, burning. LaMer pulled him away from the pillows and began to pound his back. "Goddamn it, stop!" he shouted. "I'm all right." He cleared his throat. "It's like, you know, a pencil?" He had to concentrate very hard to find words. "About so long?" he held his hands twenty centimeters apart.

"Yeah, yeah. Like to write on paper with."

David found himself nodding furiously. He stopped. "Well, the lead's what makes it write." LaMer's single eye stared. "Finish this," he said, handing her the bottle.

Eerie early morning light filtered through the window. LaMer drained the bottle, tossed it circling into the air, caught it by the neck, and, in

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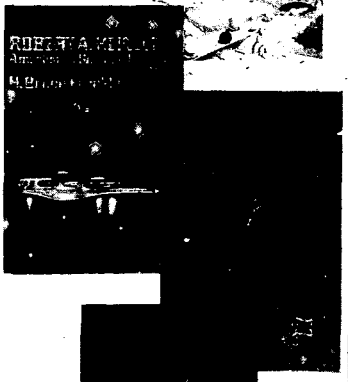

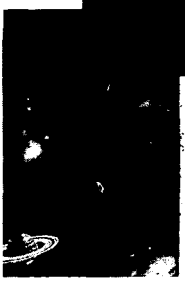

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one smooth motion, threw it across the room into a small wastebasket. She turned back to stare at him again.

"There's still no lead in a pencil. What makes it write is goddamn graphite." She paused. "Or ink, I forget which."

"It doesn't matter anymore," he said and placed a hand between her thighs. He leaned over to kiss that one, pale blue, wide-open eye.

"I can explain the technical end of it to you," LaMer was saying, "but you don't want to hear it and I don't really want to repeat it." She waved the waiter away. She looked down to her fish.

David swallowed his last mouthful of wheat toast. "But I know as well as anybody you stop on the mall that sunspots cause almost all the problems, and if what's going on up there isn't a lot like sunspots I'll eat your pegleg."

LaMer put her fork down, touched her mouth with a napkin, and leaned back into her chair. "That's what I'm trying to explain. We've insulated the chain, that's the breakthrough. Here's what'll happen: We'll pick you up wherever you are, whenever your number comes up. We'll bring you through Home Base. As you're going through we'll add the insulating layer and tack on your three hundred kilos of luggage, put the whole sparkling mess into the Puzzle Box. Then we shoot you out into the great beyond. Think about yourself as a bunch of peas in a peashooter. You only have to worry about solar activity while you're still in the solar system, anyway, and the insulation will hold, theoretically, that long. Besides, you won't be worrying about anything during transmat."

The waiter filled both cups with coffee, left a bill in a glastic tray on the table, and departed silently.

"I've never gone long-distance before. In fact, I've transmatted only once in my life. And that time it made me so sick I vomited in the people's room of an Inside restaurant." The memory made him uncomfortable. Tella-Dotun had arranged a reading for him. He'd been third on a four-poet bill, and the first two readers had been awful. Despite their silly self-serving work, though, a woman beside David had remarked after almost each poem that it had been "wonderful" and that the poets took "such risks." He shook his head to rid himself of the memory.

"What will I feel?" he asked LaMer.

"Nothing, not much anyway. There'll be a numbness when we lock on, a thrilling sensation when we start to pick you up. That should be nice, with the power we're using. It ought to be orgasmic. Then nothing, not during transmat. More or less."

"What do you mean, 'more or less'?"

LaMer tapped her spoon on the rim of her cup, then absently and expertly twirled it in her fingers like a miniature baton. "Well, I've been

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doing this as long as anybody—the pioneers are pretty much gone now, what with this accident and that—and on particularly long transmats I've felt—well, not really *felt*. Once, for instance, I got stacked up due to receiver malfunction. They just kept me in a holding pattern till they got the thing fixed, about an hour in real time. When they brought me in, I knew that time had passed. I shouldn't have known that. Similar experiences have been recorded."

"But you've felt or almost felt something?"

"I hope everything was satisfactory?" David jumped and LaMer's spoon tumbled from her hand. Cat-quick she caught it centimeters above the carpet. Willow smiled above them, green hands folded in front of his flat belly. David concentrated on slowing his heart.

"Except for the bloody help," LaMer said.

"Oh," Willow gasped and blushed under his paint. David saw he was pleased by even an insult from LaMer, another reminder of the legendary status of transmatters. He remembered how the restaurant chatter had suddenly quieted when they had entered.

Willow stared dreamily into LaMer's eye. "Ms. LaMer, the next session is just about to begin. Do you require anything else?"

"Mr. Jones and I will not be attending the session with others," LaMer said, impressing her Card on the bill. "Mr. Jones' status is such that he requires individual orientation. And, yes," she said, handing the bill to Willow with two fingers, as if it were unclean, "we require a bottle of champagne be sent to Mr. Jones' suite."

Willow glowed brighter. "Of course, of course," he stammered, "right away." He scooped up the empty tray and scurried off.

LaMer turned to David. "Silly little people, aren't they?" All heads swiveled as they rose to leave.

LaMer sat on the bed struggling with a tall boot. David set the ice-bucket with the champagne on the nightstand and straddled her leg to tug the boot off for her. He held it for a moment, surprised by the feel of it. "Real leather?" he asked.

LaMer nodded. "So's this," she said, fingering her vest. "Cost a fortune." She started to work the fasteners of her prosthesis. "Had to go to bloody Havana for them, the end of the earth as far as I'm concerned." She shot David a tired smile, lifted off the leg and dropped it across the boot. She slumped forward. "End of the frigging earth," she repeated, shaking her head.

David sat on the bed behind her, began to work at the bunched muscles in her shoulders. She sighed. "Tell me about the feeling," he said.

LaMer turned to kiss him. "Maybe I'm too old for this business, maybe going a little happy in the head, I don't know," she reached for the

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champagne bottle, "but lately I've, I guess, *experienced* the transmatation. Some of the sisters and brothers have told me the same. I'm aware, in a way. I mean, there's awareness but it's not really *I* who's aware." The champagne cork flew across the room. She drank from the bottle. "Terrible stuff," she said and gave the bottle to David. She went on, "There's a sort of sensory input, but the senses aren't discrete, so there's no vision, *per se,* or hearing, but a single reception of all the senses, an integrated processor for them all." Her voice was dreamy. David leaned on an elbow, watching and listening. "But the consciousness that's aware doesn't feel like me. It's more diffused than that." She turned to him abruptly. "That's all, except that the phenomenon becomes more pronounced with time in the particular transmat and the transmatter becomes more aware with experience. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so," David said slowly. "A career of intermittent transmats on a global scale can only suggest the consciousness that might evolve."

"And?"

"And rather than transmatting for real time periods of milliseconds my atoms'll be buzzing around the cosmos for decades. Or centuries."

"Or millennia."

In the light of a single guttering candle David knelt on the floor beside the bed, holding LaMer's knee in his hands like an icon. He bowed his head to kiss the smooth stump below it. The hair on his neck, wet from their shower, was cool. LaMer had combed it back from his forehead, and he was conscious of the absence of a forelock. The paint she had applied to his face and body crinkled his skin as it dried. LaMer lay on her back, left leg dangling off the bed. She inhaled deeply the smoke of one of David's cigarettes. She cupped a red breast in a blue hand, flicked a white nipple with a maroon nail.

David ran his finger along the inside of LaMer's thigh.He looked up to say, "Tell me about the Puzzle Box again."

LaMer moved her hips up, caught David with her thighs. She pulled again on the cigarette, smoothed his hair with her free hand. "Ah," she said, "the real quantum prize-winning breakthrough. Just like a Chinese puzzle box. A box within a box within a box within a box. Each box a transmatation booth. Each booth equipped with sensors and guidance systems. If there's a place to run to, the Puzzle Box'll find it. Can't turn 'em out fast enough. Working around the clock, still can't manufacture enough." She locked her fingers in his slick hair, pressed him to her. "Still finite, though. The Puzzle Box. You'll run out finally. Finally. If the sensors don't find anything, you'll finally run out. The last glass booth will receive you. A couple cubic meters of air. Hang there in space. You in it. The others dangling around you. Finally."

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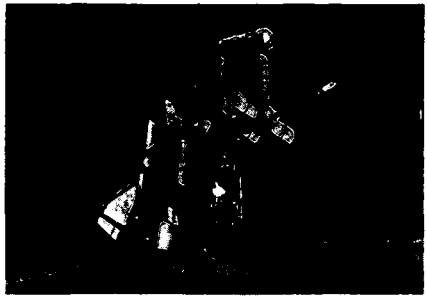

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David sat in his cell, feeling, he imagined, much like a condemned prisoner who'd finished his confession to the priest. He stared at the Media screen, not seeing it. His right hand was under his shirt. He held the beeper LaMer had given him. "When I want you, I can find you," she'd said, dropping the chain over his head. The facepaint pulled at his skin.

If he thought of anything, it was that LaMer would be at Home Base two thousand kilometers away before the el got him back to the Suburbs. If he felt anything it was sadness that LaMer would die with the rest of the world, admiration that she should choose to stay, and a perverse relief that the good-bye was over. If he saw anything, it was only a blue eye. The el started the climb to its terminus.

David felt the power of the automatic braking system before he knew the quake had begun. The rapid deceleration threw him against the front of the cell. He sat on the floor and touched his head where the nerves tingled. His fingers came away bloody. As he stared stupidly at the cushioned wall, looking for what had cut him, the el began a slow lateral drop in a series of teeth-rattling shimmies. David clung to the bench as the track creaked and buckled.

When all was still again, he was stretched along the steep angle of the floor. The doors at the sides of the cell popped open automatically, one above and one below him. He stared down at the tops of the efficiency space complexes. His bag, one corner smeared with blood, slipped out the open door below. It hit a roof fifty meters below and burst. David began to pull himself up and out the door above.

He knelt, panting, on the smooth side of the listing el. When he looked down its length he saw other passengers beginning to make their way down the slope of the tracks and the sun rising behind lavender clouds. The Law, standing erect, blew his whistle and signaled the passengers with his hands. When the first aftershock came, David saw him jiggle off the edge of the cell he'd stood on and disappear below the level of the buckled tracks. David looked towards the terminus fifty feet above. He began to crawl.

The skin of the el was polished smooth, and David's palms were wet with sweat. Every few meters, he gathered his legs beneath him, took a deep breath and leaped across the open door of another cell. Once, a tremor began as he jumped. He came down flat on his stomach. The el twisted and shuddered, and he slid back towards the open door, his nails squealing against the wall of the cell. They broke. The tremor ceased.

The nose of the el jutted five meters from the platform. The twisted, narrow tracks between glinted in the rising sun. David shucked his jacket

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and threw it away. He kicked off his sandals, retreated down the cell to the open door, rose, and ran up the incline, leaped into space. He hit the platform with a bone-crunching thud. Only when he had pulled himself over the curb, back into the suburbs, did he rest.

The Torino was gone. At first he thought that the quake had somehow shaken it off the truncated Expressway. Then he realized he had stayed too long with LaMer, and the Law, steadfast in the pulsing sun, had towed it when the meter ran down. He started at a jog down the expressway.

He reached the bottom of the expressway without feeling any further aftershocks. Without pausing, he turned to cut across the cemetery towards the Cop Shop. A deep fissure made its jagged way among the stones. He tried to keep his eyes from its depths as he crossed but he saw the exposed caskets anyway. Halfway across, sweat stinging his eyes and lungs bursting, he stopped. He stood, hands on his knees, while his empty stomach heaved and heaved again. When he could finally straighten he realized he stood upon a grave. The stone, old, dark and large, was familiar. He got his bearings and began to walk.

When his parents had died, he had not known how to mark their graves. A boy who would later make his name with words, he could see even then how little their power was in the face of death. Finally, he had had only their names chiseled into their common white stone. Those names stared back at him now, and he dropped to his knees and then prostrate before them. The long, untended grass was cool in the growing heat of day. A small tremor vibrated the earth beneath him. He did not wish to move. He slept.

He awoke with a start. He found himself curled upon the graves, one hand clutching the grass. He lay still in the high, hot sun. The sounds of dogs, not near nor far away, made him look up. A pack milled, tails wagging, around the fissure a hundred meters away. He stood slowly, the grass in his hand tearing as he rose. As he watched, a mastiff scratched his way out of the fissure, dragging something David could not identify, then made its way, growling, through the snapping pack. A breeze came up behind him. When it reached the dogs, their noses went into the air. David looked once at the white stone and began to run again.

He ran, jumping the fissure when it crossed his path. He did not look back. The Cop Shop ahead looked deserted. He could see the Torino parked in front. He fought the feeling that the dogs had caught him, that their breath was hot on his legs, that he could hear their snapping teeth. The Torino came closer and closer. He jumped the fissure again and again. He came out of the cemetery, out into the street. He was across the street, tugging the keys from his jeans' pocket. He had a hand on the

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door. It was unlocked and he jumped in across the bucket seats. He twisted back and slammed the door.

He looked through the rear window. The dogs had just reached the opposite side of the street. He heard gunshots and saw the dogs start to go down. Through the windshield he saw the Law, this one dressed in khaki coveralls, wobbling in an open window, a rifle bucking every few seconds in her grip. David punched open the glove box, pulled out his revolver, stepped out of the car, and aimed at a retreating dog. He saw its yellow head over the vane on the barrel. He followed the head, fighting to steady his breath. He let his arm drop. He looked down. In his left hand was a ball of grass.

He turned and looked to the Law. She had rested the rifle on the windowsill and now stared down at David. He pushed his gun into his belt, began to separate the blades of grass, smooth them in his palm. He folded them in half, gently, and pushed the bundle into his shirt pocket. He walked around the car, pulled the keys from the door, opened it. He looked again to the Law. "How are the streets into the outskirts," he asked.

The Law raised the rifle a few centimeters off the sill. "The streets?" she said. "What do you care about the streets? The Law takes care of the streets."

"Yes, I know. Of course. But I want to get home."

"Drive safely. Obey all traffic laws." David saw the sheen of sweat on the Law's face. Her eyes seemed independent of each other. David started to slide into his car.

"Oh, you can't take that car."

David straightened again. He said, carefully, "It's my car. I want to go home."

"But you can't. The fine isn't paid. That car is impounded. When the fine's paid, the registered owner can pick it up." The Law had shouldered the rifle. "That's the law," she said.

David turned half around and pointed to the broken el a kilometer away. "Look, I was on that thing when the quake started. My Card's still Inside."

She was petulant. "The law," she whined.

David felt that they both might be in tears in a moment. "Look, I want to go home for the end. To the house I was born in. Can't you understand that? You understand that, don't you?"

"Don't raise your voice! I'm the Law, and you must respect the Law! You must!" She was crying.

David wished to walk to her, reach up to her in her window, and embrace her. "Listen—" he began, quietly.

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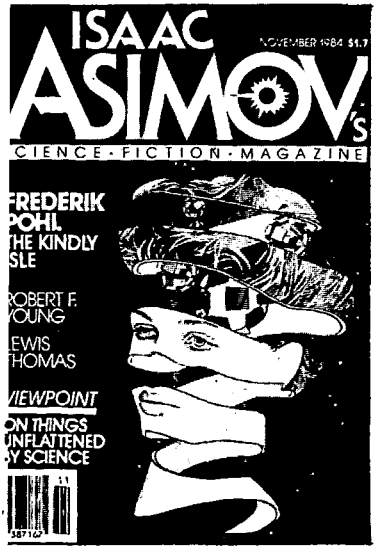

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The Law cut him off with a scream. "No!" she shouted and tightened her grip on the rifle.

David shot her in the head. The Law stood for a moment, then crumpled down out of the window. The rifle clattered on the sidewalk. David got into the car and drove off towards home.

David left the car in the drive. Leaves crunched under his feet as he walked to the house. By the door he paused to look around. He could see no damage from the quake, but something tugged at his mind. Then he saw, thought, *the leaves*. The generations of decorative, imported trees in the neighborhood swayed orange and red and amber in the hot breeze. Leaves fluttered on branches, spiraled down into the street, onto the overgrown, garbage-strewn lawns. As he watched the trees began to lose their forms. The sun was waxing. The weight of the gun dangling in his hand brought him out of his reverie. He went inside.

Lou sat in the kitchen. She looked up as he entered the room. Her face was dirty and tear-streaked. He could hear the voice of a Media caster from the large screen in the bedroom. He put the gun on the counter, walked to Lou and pulled her head against his belly. "She didn't think David was coming," she said.

Felix whined from his bed in the breakfast nook. David looked over, moved away from Lou. The old dog sat, wobbling on his front legs. His eyes were clouded.

"He's been like that since yesterday," Lou said from behind him. "He can't eat. He can't sleep. His back legs won't work."

David sat petting the dog. Felix collapsed, lay on his side, his back legs twisted beneath him, panting. David picked him up, carried him towards the back door. "Bring the gun," he said as he passed Lou.

David stood in the rising heat staring into a glare that hid the houses beyond. Lou came up behind him, touched his elbow. "Her garden," she said. David walked across his backyard, bumped into the redwood picnic table, moved over till he found the garden. He lay Felix down among the wilted and bent half-grown stalks of corn. He turned and took the revolver from Lou. He raised the gun, lowered it. He faced Lou again. Felix whined in the heat. Lou took the gun from David. His face centimeters from hers, he watched her steady it. Her scarred eye did not flinch when the gun went off.

David patted the last of the earth down with the flat of the spade. He stood staring at what he could make out of the dog's grave. Lou tugged at him. "David has to come in. He'll burn up out here. Look at what happens." David shifted his gaze to the hand she extended. It was his hand, though he was not conscious of any connection to it. She moved

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it closer to his face. The paint was pocked with blisters. He let her pull him towards the house. He could not see her ahead of him. When he heard her open the door, he thought to drop the spade he'd been dragging.

He stood in the kitchen. Lou made her way through the house pulling shades. She came back, took him by the hand again. "It's best in the bedroom," she said.

On the big screen a panel of clerics droned on. David sat against the foot of the bed, Lou curled beside him. He brought the grass out of his pocket. It had been cured in the heat, like farmers' hay. Make hay while the sun shines, make hay while the sun shines, he chanted to himself. He separated the blades and laid them in a neat row on the carpet. He began to braid them into a chain.

The Media caster came back on to recap the top stories. Solar activity dramatically increasing. More quakes expected. Death count in the tens of millions. The Red Cross Rescue Effort had been disrupted at number 439. The end was thought to be very near.

The local Media came on, giving the time. It would soon be evening; some relief from the heat might be expected then, though speculation was that quake activity would rise in inverse proportion. The caster began the list of precautions again. David braided the ends of the chain together. Full bathtubs, cellars, battery power . . .

"What's that?" Lou pointed to the screen. David pulled the last end of the last blade tight, dropped the ring in his pocket. He looked up. A small red rectangle pulsed in the upper right-hand corner of the screen.

"There's a message," he said.

"Is he going to get it?" she asked.

David struggled to his feet, ambled out the door through the bright rooms to the darkening study on the east side of the house. He pressed the "respond" key.

The screen fluttered. A standard logo came on alerting David of audio-visual technical difficulties and asking him to stand by. In a moment the logo disappeared and a green message came clicking on. Complete it read:

> Global communication network in shambles. Attempts to re-establish order abandoned at 3:30 PDT. Screening Committee's priority system abandoned with #439. Be ready. I have the controls. LaMer.

David lurched forward in his chair, spread his fingers across the keyboard and typed:

> How soon?

The response began to appear:

> Not very goddamned—

The screen flashed from its customary black to white. Black characters marched across the screen:

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GOVERNMENT MONITOR: Use of profanity either in visual, audio or written communications, strictly prohibited by the Law.

David waited. Another message came through:

Security code 218; clearance A.

The Monitor responded:

Code and level irrelevant.

The last message stared from the screen. Panic rose in his belly as David waited for LaMer to respond.

He reached for the keys himself, ready to beg. LaMer responded:

Irrelevant?

There was another long pause. Then:

Legally.

LaMer let the word hang there for a full thirty seconds, then typed:

I wish to proceed. File and sign your report.

This time the response was immediate:

Please proceed.

The screen went black.

LaMer typed, the characters showed green:

Forty-five minutes, an hour maximum.

David punched the "hold" button, jumped from his chair and ran to the bedroom. Lou sat where he'd left her, curled before the screen, which read "Please Wait." She looked to David, then pointed to the screen. "What did it mean?" she asked.

David grabbed her by the extended wrist and pulled her to her feet. "We're getting out of here. That's what that means." He ran, dragging her, through the house and sat down before the console. He typed out:

Dependent.

LaMer responded without hesitation:

Congratulations and best wishes. Keep her close. Program follows.

David looked up to Lou standing beside him. "Marry David?" he asked.

She stared at the screen. She nodded, "Okay."

He looked to the program on the screen. "What's your full name?"

"Louisa Mae Carlton."

He typed it in. "ID number?"

"She never got one."

He typed in "N/A" and held his breath. The program gave the next question. David exhaled.

Lou read the question from the screen and answered it. "Fifteen October twenty-ought-six." David entered it, shook his head. Lou would be fifteen in three months. He typed in "wife" and turned to her for the next answer.

She shook her head. "She has none," she said. No living relatives.

Another message appeared:

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Okay. Ten minutes to half an hour. Good-bye and good luck.

Love, LaMer.

David stood and kissed Lou. He held her tight and waited for the numbness that meant LaMer had them. He closed his eyes and saw a field of velvet blue, and in that field stars shone blue and white and yellow. Constellations formed and swirled, kaleidoscopic, around him, dispersed. All was breathless and at peace.

David loosened his embrace. Something caught his eye. The screen was white again. It read:

GOVERNMENT MONITOR: No record of marriage posted. Dependent wife disallowed.

David felt Lou pull away from him. He turned to see her begin to back away from the screen, one hand reaching out to it, a finger pointing. She was saying, "no, no, no, no," again and again, each syllable growing in volume.

"Lou," he said and held out his hands.

She was screaming now. He took a step towards her as she backed into the bookshelves opposite the console. She slid slowly down the packed shelves, sat, stared at the screen, still pointing. Then, she was quiet; she began to rock and moan.

"Forget it," David said, "just let it go." She did not respond. "Just let it go," he said again. "Here," he said and leaned over to cut the power. The screen went black. "See, it's all gone." Still she rocked. He stepped away from the console, took a heavy book from the shelves and threw it into the screen. Sparks jumped and leads hissed as they shorted out. "See?" he asked, walking to her. "See, it's all gone, it's all over." He knelt beside her, kissed her, and then kissed her again. Finally, her lips shuddered alive, locked onto his.

He pulled away. "Come on," he said, "there's still a chance."

He pulled the Torino to a screeching stop at the end of a long line of cars. He had never seen so many vehicles gathered in one place. He waited for the traffic to clear. He looked down at the instrument panel. The red needle of the temperature gauge lay horizontally, pointing right. He looked up. He could make out the church steeple and the cross atop it two blocks away in the light. He looked to Lou. "Let's run," he said.

The asphalt sucked at and burned his bare feet, the air seared his lungs. The sweat that dripped before him was colored with facepaint. The revolver dragged at his arm.

"Just a second," Lou said and veered off. She ran across a yellow lawn toward flowers that grew in the shade of an eave. David started to follow.

He was caught, an insect in amber, one hand extended, one foot lifted, his lungs half full of superheated air. His brain fought to get his body back under control. The heat was gone, the pain of his blistered feet. A

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little electrical charge danced on his skin and he felt himself receding. His eyes stayed caught on Lou bending over the flowers, snapping them one by one from their stems, straightening. He wanted, at least, to say good-bye, to kiss her once more; he wanted to stay, and, suddenly, air rushed into his lungs, and his hand dropped to his side. Lou was back, a bouquet of wilted marigolds in one hand, and then they ran on.

The old man's sleeve stopped half-way across his forehead. "Married, you say?" He finished wiping his brow. "Why, yes, of course, I will, Davy. It will give me pleasure to marry you two on this blackest of days." He gazed at them in wonder. "Why, yes. It's just the thing." He took Lou by the arm and led them, through the intense red and blue and green and yellow lights streaming through the windows, toward the front of the church. The pews were filled and they had to step over and around those sitting on the threadbare carpet of the aisle. Many were burned; the limbs of some were splinted and bandaged. The din of dozens of quiet conversations filled David's ears. Here and there, someone keened.

Preacher's voice cut through the background noise as he chatted to Lou. "No, no," he was saying, "I guess I don't know your family. But Davy's, that's another matter. I baptized him right there in that font. Oh, heavens, yes. Why, Davy's parents and I worked together on many a cause. Excuse us, please. Trying to get things back to normal, you understand. But, of course, you're too young to remember normal, aren't you, dear? It was a good fight we fought, though. I think the Lord's fight. Pardon us, please. They died trying to make things better. The day I spoke over their graves was one of the saddest for me ever. They were truly wonderful people. Pardon. Oh, Lord bless me for a fool, though, I did know some Carltons, your grandparents perhaps. Sorry to say I did not know them well."

They had reached the chancel. Preacher turned and, placing his hands on their shoulders, positioned each of them. "Now, it'll just be a moment." Preacher stepped to the side and busied himself at the keyboard of an ancient console. Soft music filled the church. Conversations dropped off.

Preacher placed himself between Lou and David on the step above. He leaned to them and said, "My children, the ceremony must be brief. There are many gathered here who need my help." He straightened, raised his arms and addressed the refugees who filled the church.

"Friends, a great thing is about to happen. Great because the simple affirmation of marriage is always an occasion for joy among us, and great because it happens today amid pain and suffering and uncertainty. We are blessed to witness it." He drew his attention closer. "David, do you take Louisa to be your wife?"

"I do."

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"Louisa, do you take David to be your husband?"

"I do."

Preacher leaned close and stage-whispered, "Do you happen to have a ring?"

David pulled the braided grass from his pocket and placed it carefully on Lou's finger. It held together.

Preacher stared, dumbfounded, at Lou's finger, then threw his head back and nearly roared, "In the sight of God and this congregation, I pronounce you wife and husband. You can kiss the bride."

David clutched the old man's shirt. "Preacher, we need to register this right away."

"Davy, such legalities at a time like this? Kiss your bride, son."

"Please, Preacher, it's important to us."

Preacher looked deep into his eyes. "Why, of course. If that's what you wish." He led them to the console, punched a few buttons, slapped it sharply on the side when it did not respond. The white-screened government program came up. Preacher turned to them, suddenly bright. "Now, Davy, you enter the information while I set up the equipment."

"Equipment?"

"Of course, Davy, what would a wedding be without stills?"

David stared without comprehension, but Preacher was already pulling a black box and a collapsed tripod from beneath the console. A hymn played. David entered the information.

Preacher was looking over his shoulder. "Fine," he said as David filled in the last blank. "Now, just let me enter my ID number and code." He moved David gently to one side, hit a few keys. The screen read "Accepted and Recorded." Preacher plugged the end of a coaxial cable into a jack in the console, jabbed pale fingers at the keyboard, turned to David and Lou. "Now," he said leading them away from the console, "you two just stand here. . . ."

Preacher looked into the viewfinder, adjusted the box to center David and Lou there. She is awfully young, he thought. Two young people, one painted and streaked, barefooted, a big gun stuck in his belt, the other barely more than a child. The world was all too ridiculous, too sad. Oh, but what times he'd seen. There, in the viewfinder, the couple held their kiss, seemed to pulse, then glow. Preacher pressed the shutter, looked up, and David and Lou were gone. He turned to look at the congregation. Mouths hung open, and no one made a sound. The old man lifted his eyes to heaven, and, in a loud voice, proclaimed, "Our Father, we praise you for the miracle you have shown us." He turned his eyes to the congregation. "Glory be to God. Join me, please," he asked, reaching towards heaven with both hands, "in saying the twenty-third psalm."

* * *

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LaMer's hands were poised above the keyboard. Her eyes scanned the screen, looking for trouble in the program. She was alone, deep in Home Base, standing at a jerry-rigged trasmatation center. Above her head, twenty stories of glass and steel melted down. Ancillary systems lining the walls hissed and shorted. For a millisecond something flashed in the glass booth before her, then was gone. She punched in a code and, in so doing, added the last bit of power at her command to the program. The screen told her that David and his new wife were chains of atoms strung out along a trajectory that would take them out of the solar system. She thought of those atoms, each a little sun circled by the planets of its electrons. She thought of the stars David would soon race among, each a sun, perhaps circled by planets, planets perhaps capable of supporting reconstituted human beings. She thought of her own sun, now consuming the planet that had circled it for millennia. "Let it go. I've seen it all," she said aloud. Suddenly she was intensely happy. She looked up with one blue eye that could see beyond the melting concrete, through the hell of fire and pain she knew held sway above, to where heaven lay. She extended both middle fingers to God. "Screwed you again, you disease-ridden old whore."

She was still laughing when the earth boiled to gas. ●

Take a day off from smoking

... from smoking. Join the Great American Smokeout on Thursday, November 21. Millions of Americans across the country will make a fresh start and try not to smoke for 24 hours. How about you? Or, if you don't smoke, *adopt* a smoker for the day and promise to help that friend get through the 24 hours without a cigarette!

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY®

A few **"quit tips"**

Hide all ashtrays, matches, etc.

Lay in a supply of sugarless gum, carrot sticks, etc.

Drink lots of liquids, but pass up coffee & alcohol.

Tell everyone you're quitting for the day.

When the urge to smoke hits, take a deep breath, hold it for 10 seconds, & release it slowly.

Exercise to relieve the tension.

Try the "buddy system," and ask a friend to quit too.

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THE WAKE OF GRAVITY

Pressure burns white candles
Of current down in the abyss canyons

As luminous codes cycle in their skin
Blinking fishes
Carry cubic tons within
—once surfaced
They'd explode like planets of blood

Another level beyond this
Mutables swim

Here these marionettes of lunar rhythm
Restless as net-entangled cetaceans
Are shaped of plankton and debris
—lightfree—shadowless
Potentials that form and reform

Below that slow spikes of rust amend
Geologic tablatures of iron writing

The simatic catacombs secrete
New senses—rooms of a deep deserted mansion
Which with reedy whispers repeat
Lone bells and basso eddyings
To rehearse the drowned languages of air

And last beneath the photon shield
Only the wake reveals the order of decay

Thin as the legs of stalking shrimp
But dense as brass
Inert as any noble gas
An anti-sky is formed
—the ocean bottom, the end of Time

—Andrew Joron & Robert Frazier

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HE TRAVELS THE FASTEST

by Isaac Asimov

art: Hank Jankus

Although George and Azazel's adventures are well known to our regular readers, we are pleased to have on hand at last, an account of their first bit of meddling into the affairs of humankind.

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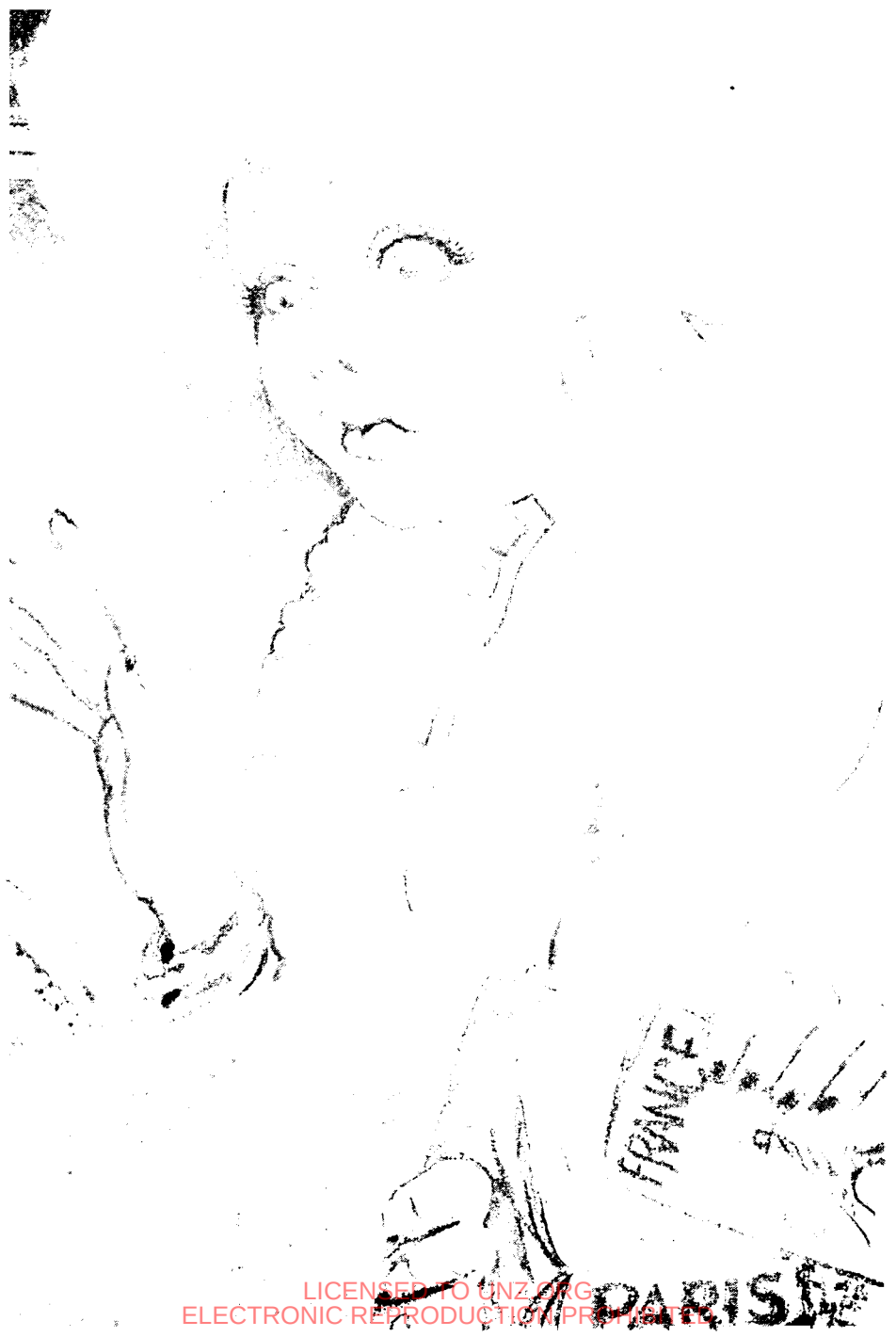

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I had just returned from a trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, and my relief at getting back to my beloved typewriter and word processor was mingled with a residue of faint resentment at my having had to go in the first place.

George did not consider the fact that he had just ravened his way through the offerings of a fine restaurant, at my hard-earned expense, an adequate reason for offering me sympathy.

He said, after he had dislodged a fiber of steak from between two teeth, "I do not really understand, old fellow, why you should find fault over the fact that otherwise respectable organizations seem to be willing to pay you thousands of dollars to listen to you talk for an hour. Having heard you speak now and then, I would think it far more likely that you speak without charge and refuse to stop unless they pay you thousands of dollars. Surely, the latter is the more likely way of squeezing money out of people—though I have no wish to hurt your feelings, assuming you have any."

"When did you ever hear me speak?" I asked. "The interstices in your own maunderings allow no one more than two dozen words at a time." (Naturally, I was careful to make my point in just twenty-four words.)

George ignored me, as I was sure he would. "It shows a particularly unlovely side of your soul," he said, "that in your mad lust for the dross called 'money' you should so freely and frequently consent to undergo the pains of the travel you claim to hate. It reminds me a bit of the tale of Sophocles Moskowitz who had a similar lazy disinclination to stir from his armchair except when the further swelling of his already gross bank account was in view. This disinclination he also euphemized by calling it 'an aversion to travel.' It took my friend, Azazel, to change *that*."

"Don't you get your two-centimeter disaster-demon after me," I said in alarm; an alarm that was just as real as it would have been if I had actual cause to think that that figment of George's diseased imagination really existed.

George again ignored me.

It was actually [George said] the first time I ever called upon Azazel for help. It was almost thirty years ago, you see. I had only recently learned how to draw the little creature from his own world, and I had not yet learned to understand his powers. He boasted of them, to be sure, but where is the living creature, other than myself, who does not consistently overstate his or her own powers and abilities?

I was much more familiar at that time with a magnificent young woman named Fifi who had, a year earlier, decided that Sophocles Moskowitz would not, in person, sufficiently detract from the kind of husband

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his large fortune would make her. Even after they married, she remained a surreptitious, though inexplicably virtuous, friend of mine.

Despite her virtue, I was always glad to see her, however, something you will understand when I tell you that her figure was one thing that could *not* be overstated. In her presence, I always remembered, with austere satisfaction, certain amiable indelicacies in which we had participated in the past.

"Boom-Boom," I said, for I had never gotten out of the habit of using her stage name, given her by the common consent of the awed observers of her interesting act, "you are looking well." This I had no hesitation in saying, for so was I.

"Oh, yeah?" she said, in the insouciant manner that always recalled the streets of New York in all their brassy splendor. "Well, I ain't feeling good."

I did not believe that for a moment, for if my memory could be trusted, she must have felt very good indeed from early adolescence, but I said, "What is the trouble, my resilient dear?"

"It's Sophocles, that creep."

"Surely you're not annoyed with your husband, Boom-Boom. It is impossible for so wealthy a man to be annoying."

"That's all *you* know. What a four-flusher! Listen, you remember you told me Sophocles was as rich as some guy named Croesus, which is a guy I never heard of? Well, how come you never told me this guy named Croesus must have been a champion tight-wad?"

"Sophocles is a tight-wad?"

"Champion! Can you beat it? What's the use of marrying a rich guy who's a tight-wad?"

"Surely, Boom-Boom, you can manage to wheedle a little money out of him by the elusive promise of nocturnal Elysium."

Fifi's forehead crinkled a bit. "I'm not sure what that means, but I know you, so don't talk dirty. Besides, I promised him he *wouldn't* get it, whatever it was you said, if he didn't loosen up, but he would rather squeeze his wallet than me and, if you think of it, that's pretty darned insulting." The poor thing whimpered softly.

I patted her hand in as unbrotherly a fashion as I could manage on short notice.

She burst out, passionately, "When I married that bum, I thought, 'Well, Fifi, here's where you get to go to Paris and the Riveera and Bonus Airs and Casablanca and like that.' Huh! Not a chance!"

"Don't tell me that hound won't take you to Paris."

"He won't go *nowhere*. He says he don't want to leave Manhattan. He says he don't like it out there. He says he don't like plants and trees and animals and grass and dirt and foreigners and any buildings except New

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York buildings. I say, 'How about some nice shopping mall?' but he don't like that, neither."

"Why don't you go without him, Boom-Boom?"

"That would be more fun than with him, you can bet. But with what? That guy's got his pants pockets sewed up with all his credit cards inside. I've got to do all my shopping at Macy's." Her voice rose to a near shriek. "I didn't marry that bozo to shop at Macy's."

I gazed speculatively at various portions of the damsel and regretted that I could not afford them. Before she married, she was occasionally willing to make a contribution to the cause in an art-for-art's sake manner, but I had a feeling that her nobler status as a married woman had hardened her professional view of the matter. In those days, you must understand, I was even more vigorous than I am now in my present prime of life, but I was as unacquainted with the coin of the realm then as now.

I said, "Suppose I could talk him into liking to travel?"

"Oh, boy, I sure wish someone could."

"Suppose *I* could. I suppose you would be grateful."

Her eye rested on me reminiscently. "George," she said, "the day he tells me he's taking me to Paris, you and I do an Asbury Park number. Remember Asbury Park?"

Did I remember that New Jersey coastal resort? Could I forget my aching muscles? Every part of me, almost, was stiff for two days afterward.

I discussed the matter with Azazel over some beer, a stein for me and a drop for him. He found the hops delightfully stimulating. Cautiously, I said to him, "Azazel, can that advanced technology of yours really do things that would amaze me?"

He looked at me with a soused expression. "Just tell me what you want. Just tell me what you want. I'll show you whether I'm 'old fumble-hands' or not. I'll show them all."

Once, in a moment of stupefaction over some lemon-scented furniture polish (he said he found the peel-extract mind-expanding) he told me that he had once been insulted in that fashion on his own world.

I let him have another drop of beer, and said, carelessly, "I have a friend who does not like to travel. I suppose it would be as nothing for a person as skilled and advanced as yourself to change that dislike into an absolute fever to travel."

I must admit some of his eagerness vanished at once. "What I meant," he said, in his whistling voice and odd accent, "was for you to ask something sensible—like making that ugly picture on the wall hang straight

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by the power of my mind alone." The picture moved as he spoke, and hung crookedly in the other direction.

"Yes, but why should I want my pictures straightened?" I said. "I go to great trouble to get them to hang at a precisely correct non-rectilinear angle. What I do want is to have you imbue Sophocles Moskowitz with a travel mania, one that would lead him to travel, if necessary, even without his wife." I added that because it occurred to me that there might be advantages to having Fifi in town, on occasion, with Sophocles out of town.

Azazel said, "That is not easy. An ingrained dislike for travel may well depend on various brain-deforming childhood experiences. It would require mental engineering of the most advanced sort to make up for that. I don't say it can't be done, since the crude minds of your people are not easily damaged, but I would have to have the person pointed out to me, so that I could identify his mind and study it."

That was easy enough. I had Fifi invite me to dinner as an old college classmate. (She had spent some time on a college campus a few years back, though I don't think she attended classes. She was very extracurricular.)

I brought Azazel with me in my jacket pocket and I could occasionally hear him squeaking elaborate mathematical formulae under his breath. I assumed he was analyzing Sophocles Moskowitz's mind and, if so, that was an impressive feat, for it did not take much conversation for me to appreciate the fact that his mind was not large enough to allow much scope for analysis.

Once home, I said to Azazel, "Well?"

With an airy wave of his scaly little arm, he said, "I can do it. Do you have a multiphase, mento-dynamic synaptometer handy?"

"Not handy," I said. "I lent mine out yesterday to a friend of mine who was leaving for Australia."

"That was stupid of you," grumbled Azazel. "That means I'll have to work by tablecloth calculations."

He remained querulous, too, even after he had finished (as he maintained) successfully.

"It was almost impossible," he said. "Only a person of my own magnificent attainments could have done it and I had to pin down his mind into its present adjusted form with huge spikes."

I took it he was speaking metaphorically, and said so.

To which Azazel replied, "Well, it might as well be huge spikes. No one will be able to budge his mind after this. He's just going to want to travel with such overwhelming firmness that he could almost shake the

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universe if that was what would be required to make the travel possible. *That* will show those—"

He burst out into a long string of strident syllables in his native language. I didn't understand what he said, of course, but it was quite clear from the fact that the ice-cubes in the refrigerator in the next room had all melted that what he said was uncomplimentary. I suspected he was casting some animadversions on those on his native world who had accused him of lack of deftness.

It was not more than three days later that Fifi phoned me. She is not as effective on the phone as in person for reasons that are quite obvious, although, perhaps, not to you with your congenital inability to take note of the finer things of life. One is more aware of the slight hardness in her voice, you see, when one is not able to be directly reminded of a counterbalancing softness elsewhere.

"George," she cackled, "you must be magic. I don't know what you did at that dinner but it worked. Sophocles is going to take me to Paris. It's his own idea and he's awful excited about it. Ain't that great?"

"It's more than great," I said, with natural enthusiasm. "It is earth-shaking. We can now indulge in that little promise you made. We can do a repeat of Asbury Park and shake the earth."

Women, however, as even you may have noticed from time to time, lack the feeling that a bargain is sacred. They are quite different from men in this respect. They seem to have no conception of the importance of keeping their word, no feeling for honor.

She said, "We're leaving tomorrow, George, so I ain't got time right now. I'll call you when I get back."

She hung up and that was that. The woman had twenty-four hours to spare and I would scarcely have used half of them—but off she went.

I *did* hear from her when she returned, but that was six months later.

She phoned me again, and, at first, I didn't recognize her voice. There was something haggard and worn out about it.

"To whom am I speaking?" I asked, with my usual dignity.

She said, wearily, "This is Fifi Laverne Moskowitz."

"Boom-Boom," I cried. "You're back! Marvelous! Come on over right now, and let's—"

She said, "George, drop dead! If it's your magic, you're a miserable phony and I wouldn't Asbury Park with you if you could hang by your toes twice as long."

I was astonished. "Didn't Sophocles take you to Paris?"

"Yes, he did. Now ask me did I get my shopping done."

I was willing. "Did you get your shopping done?"

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"Like fun! I didn't even get it begun. Sophocles never stopped!" Her voice shed its weariness and, under the stress of emotion, rose to a shriek.

"We reached Paris and kept right on going. He kept pointing out things as we passed at top speed. 'That's the Eiffel Tower,' he said, pointing to some stupid building under construction. 'That's Notre Dame,' he said. He didn't even know what he was talking about. Two football players once smuggled me into Notre Dame and it ain't in Paris. It's in South Bend, Indiana.

"But who cares? We went on to Frankfurt and Berne and Vienna—which them stupid foreigners call Veen. Is there someplace called Treest?"

"Trieste," I said. "Yes, there is."

"Then we went there, too. And we never stopped off at hotels. We stopped at old farmhouses. Sophocles said that was the way to travel. He said you saw people and nature. Who wants to see people and nature? What we didn't see was showers. And plumbing. After a while you get so, you smell. And I got *things* in my hair. I just now took five showers and I'm *still* not clean."

"Take five more showers in my place," I urged in the most reasonable possible way, "and we can Asbury Park it."

She didn't seem to hear me. It's amazing how deaf women are to simple reason. She said, "He's getting started again next week. He said he wants to cross the Pacific and go to Hong Kong. He's going on an oil freighter. He says that's the way to see the ocean. I said, 'Listen, you screwball creep, you ain't going to get me on no slow boat to China so I can be all to yourself alone.' "

"Very poetic," I said.

"And you know what he said? He said, 'Very well, my dear. I'll go without you.' Then he said something real weird because it made no sense. He said, 'Down to Gehenna or up to the throne, he travels the fastest who travels alone.' What does that mean? What's Gehenna? How did a throne get into it? Does he think he's Queen of England?"

"It's Kipling," I said.

"Don't be crazy. I never kippled so don't tell me he did. He can hardly do it missionary. I told him I'd divorce him and take him to the cleaners. And he said, 'Suit yourself, my sub-moronic dear, but you have no grounds and will get nothing. All that is important to me is travel.' Can you beat that? And that sub-moronic bit. Still trying to sweet-talk me."

You've got to understand, old fellow, that this was Azazel's first job for me and he hadn't learned control. And I *did* ask him to have Sophocles travel without his wife on occasion.

There was still the advantage to such a situation that I had foreseen from the start. "Boom-Boom," I said, "let's talk over the divorce together between Asbury—"

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"And you, you miserable wimp. Whatever magic, or whatever you did, I don't care. Just stay out of my life because I know a guy who will squash you into pancakes as soon as I give him the word. And he kipples, too, because he does everything else."

Boom-Boom, I'm afraid, had gone Bust-Bust, though not in a way I would have wanted her to or, knowing her measurements and style, expected her to.

I called on Azazel but, though he tried, there was no way he could undo what he had done. And he flatly refused to try anything toward making Boom-Boom more reasonable toward me. He said that would be too much for anyone. I don't know why.

He kept track of Sophocles for me, however. The man's mania grew. He crossed the Continental Divide on his hands. He went up the Nile on water-skis, all the way to Lake Victoria. He crossed Antarctica on a hang-glider. When President Kennedy announced in 1961 that we would reach the Moon by the end of the decade, Azazel said, "That's my adjustment doing its work again."

I said, "You mean that whatever you did to his brain gives him the power to influence the President and the space program?"

"He doesn't do it on purpose," said Azazel, "but I told you the adjustment was strong enough to shake the universe."

And he did go on to the Moon, old chap. Remember *Apollo 13,* the one that was supposedly wrecked in space on the way to the Moon in 1970, with the crew just barely getting back to Earth? Actually, Sophocles had stowed away on it and had taken a portion of it to the Moon, leaving the actual crew to get back to Earth as best they could with the rest.

He's been on the Moon ever since, traveling all over its surface. He has no air, no food, no water, but his adjustment to continual travel must somehow take care of that. In fact, something may have worked out by now to take him to Mars—and elsewhere.

George shook his head, sadly. "So ironic. So ironic."

"What's ironic?" I asked.

"Don't you see? Poor Sophocles Moskowitz! He is a new and improved version of the Wandering Jew, and the irony is that he isn't even Orthodox."

George put his left hand to his eyes and fumbled for his napkin with his right hand. In doing so, he accidentally picked up the ten dollar bill I had placed at the side of the table as a tip for the waiter. He mopped his eyes with his napkin but I didn't see what happened to the ten dollar bill. He left the restaurant sobbing, and the table bare.

I sighed and put out another ten dollar bill. ●

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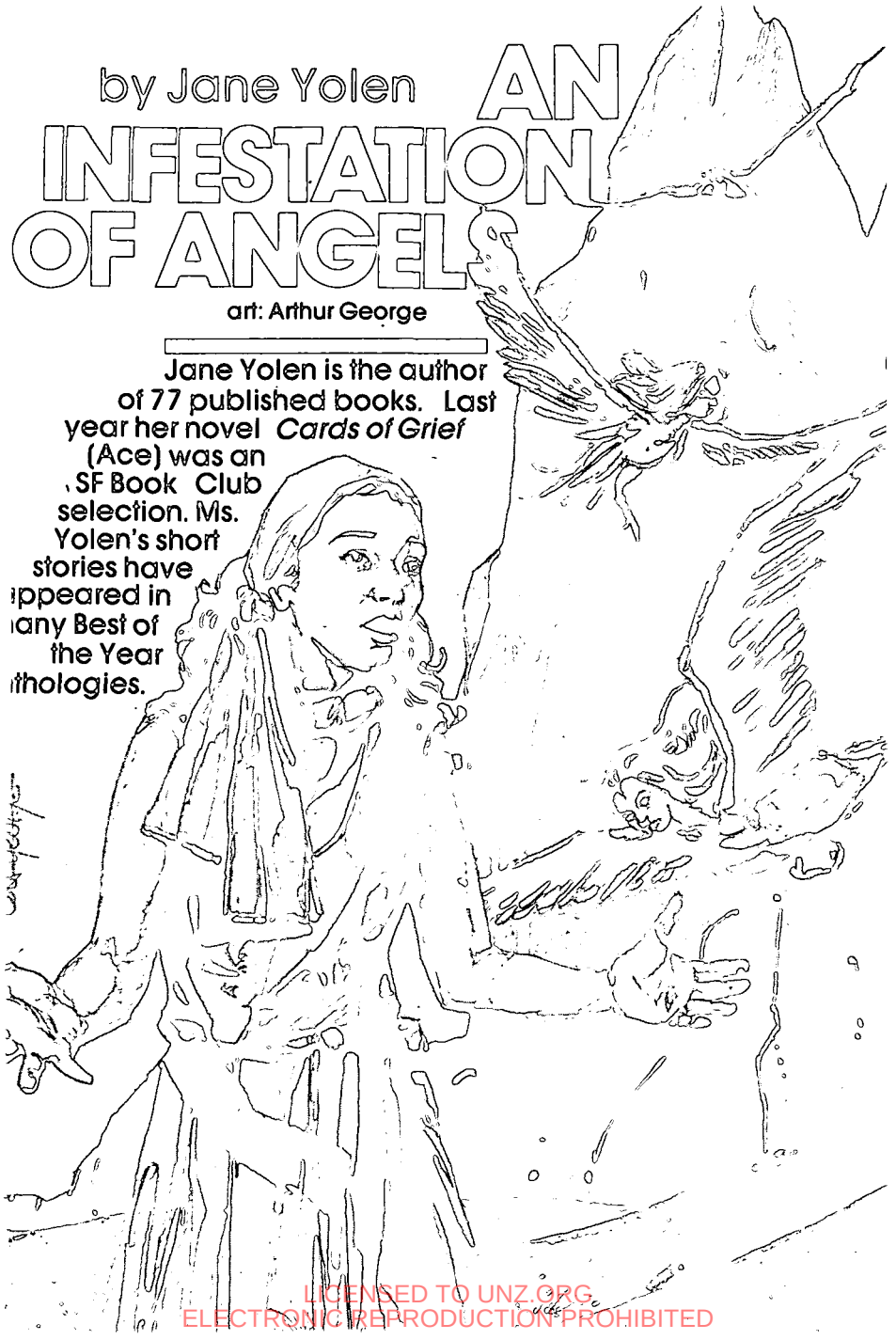
by Jane Yolen

AN INFESTATION OF ANGELS

art: Arthur George

Jane Yolen is the author of 77 published books. Last year her novel *Cards of Grief* (Ace) was an SF Book Club selection. Ms. Yolen's short stories have appeared in many Best of the Year anthologies.



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The angels came again today, filthy things, dropping golden-hard wing feathers and turds as big and brown as camel dung. This time one of them took Isak, clamping him from behind with massive talons. We could hear him screaming long after the covey was out of sight. His blood stained the doorpost where they took him. We left it there, part warning, part desperate memorial, with the dropped feathers nailed above. In a time of plagues, this infestation of angels was the worst.

We did not want to stay in the land of the Gipts, but slaves must do as their masters command. And though we were not slaves in the traditional sense, only hirelings, we had signed contracts and the Gipts are great believers in contracts. It was a saying of theirs that "One who goes back on his signed word is no better than a thief." What they do to thieves is considered grotesque even in this godforsaken desert-land.

So we were trapped here, under skies that rained frogs, amid sparse fields that bred locusts, beneath a sun that raised rashes and blisters on our sensitive skins. It was a year of unnature. Yet if any one of us complained, the leader of the Gipts, the faró, waved the contract high over his head, causing his followers to break into that high ululation they mis-call laughter.

We stayed.

Minutes after Isak was taken, his daughter Miriamne came to my house with the Rod of Leaders. I carved my own sign below Isak's and then spoke the solemn oath in our ancient tongue to Miriamne and the nine others who came to witness the passing of the stick. My sign was a snake, for my clan is Serpent. It had been exactly twelve rotations since the last member of Serpent had led the People here, but if the plague of angels lasted much longer, there would be no one else of my tribe to carry on in this place. We were not a warrior clan and I was the last. We had always been a small clan, and poor, ground under the heels of the more prosperous tribes.

When the oath was done and properly attested to—we are a people of parchment and ink—we sat down at the table together to break bread.

"We cannot stay longer," began Josu. His big, bearded face was so crisscrossed with scars it looked like a map, and the southern hemisphere was moving angrily. "We must ask the faró to let us out of our contract."

"In all the years of our dealings with the Gipts," I pointed out, "there has never been a broken contract. My father and yours, Josu, would turn in their graves knowing we even consider such a thing." My father, comfortably dead these fifteen years back in the Homeland would not have bothered turning, no matter what the cause. But Josu's father, like all those of Scorpion, had been the anxious type, always looking for extra trouble. It took little imagination to picture him rotating in the earth like a lamb on a holiday spit.

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Miriamne wept silently in the corner, but her brothers pounded the table with fists as broad as hammers.

"He *must* let us go!" Ur shouted.

"Or at least," his younger, larger brother added sensibly, "he must let us put off the work on his temple until the angels migrate north. It is almost summer."

Miriamne was weeping aloud now, though whether for Isak's sudden bloody death or at the thought of his killers in the lush high valleys of the north was difficult to say.

"It will do us no good to ask the faró to let us go," I said. "For if we do, he will use us as the Gipts always use thieves, and that is not a happy prospect." By *us,* of course, I meant me, for the faró's wrath would be visited upon the asker which, as leader, would be me. "But . . ." I paused, pauses being the coin of Serpent's wisdom.

They looked expectant.

". . . if we could persuade the faró that this plague was meant for the Gipts and not us . . ." I left that thought in front of them. The Serpent clan is known for its deviousness and wit, and deviousness and wit were what was needed now, in this time of troubles.

Miriamne stopped weeping. She walked around the table and stood behind me, putting her hands on my shoulders.

"I stand behind Masha," she said.

"And I." It was Ur, who always followed his sister's lead.

And so, one by one by one, the rest of the minon agreed. What the ten agreed to, the rest of the People in the land of the Gipts would do without question. In this loyalty lay our strength.

I went at once to the great palace of the faró, for if I waited much longer he would not understand the urgency of my mission. The Gipts are a fat race with little memory, which is why they have others build them large reminders. The deserts around are littered with their monuments—stone and bone and mortar tokens cemented with the People's blood. Ordinarily we do not complain of this. After all, we are the only ones who can satisfactorily plan and construct these mammoth memories. The Gipts are incapable on their own. Instead they squat upon their vast store of treasures, doling out golden tokens for work. It is a strange understanding we have, but no stranger than some of nature's other associations. Does not the sharp-beaked plover feed upon the crocodile's back? Does not the tiny remora cling to the shark?

But this year the conditions in the Gipt kingdom had been intolerable. While we often lose a few of the People to the heat, to the badly-prepared Giptanese food, or to the ever-surprising visit of the Gipt pox, there had never before been such a year: plague after plague after plague. There

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were dark murmurs everywhere that our God had somehow been angered. And the last, this hideous infestation.

Normally angels stay within their mountain fasts, feasting on wild goats and occasional nestlings. They are rarely seen, except from afar on their spiraling mating flights when the males circle the heavens, caroling and displaying their stiffened pinions and erections to their females who watch from the heights. (There are, of course, stories of Gipt women who, inflamed by the sight of that strange, winged masculinity, run off into the wilds and are never seen again. Women of the People would never do such a thing.)

However this year there had been a severe drought and the mountain foliage was sparse. Many goats died of starvation. The angels, hungry for red meat, had found our veins carried the same sweet nectar. Working out on the monuments, walking along the streets unprotected, we were easier prey than the horned goats. And the Gipts allow us to carry no weapons. It is in the contract.

Fifty-seven had fallen to the angel claws, ten of them of my own precious clan. It was too many. We *had* to convince the faró that this plague was his problem and not ours. It would take all of the deviousness and wit of a true Serpent. I thought quickly as I walked down the great wide street, the Street of Memories, towards the palace of the faró.

Because the Gipts think a woman's face and ankle can cause unnecessary desire, both had to be suitably draped. I wore the traditional black robe and pants that covered my legs, and the black silk mask that hid all but my eyes. However, a builder needs to be able to move easily, and it was hot in this land, so my stomach and arms were bare. Those parts of the body were considered undistinguished by the Gipts. It occurred to me as I walked that my stomach and arms were thereby flashing unmistakable signals to any angels on the prowl. My grip on the Rod of Leadership tightened. I shifted to carry it between both hands. I would not go meekly, as Isak had, clamped from behind. I twirled and looked around, then glanced up and scanned the skies.

There was nothing there but the clear, untrammeled blue of the Gipt summer canopy. Not even a bird wrote in lazy script across that slate.

And so I got to the palace without incident. The streets had been as bare as the sky. Normally the streets would be a-squall with the People and other hirelings of the Gipts. *They* only traveled in donkey-drawn chairs and at night, when their overweight, ill-proportioned bodies can stand the heat. And since the angels are a diurnal race, bedding down in their aeries at night, Gipts and angels rarely meet.

I knocked at the palace door. The guards, mercenaries hired from across the great water, their black faces mapped with ritual scars, opened the

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doors from within. I nodded slightly. In the ranks of the Gipts, the People were higher than they. However it says in our holy books that all shall be equal, so I nodded.

They did not return my greetings. Their own religion counted mercenaries as dead men until they came back home. The dead do not worry about the niceties of conversation.

"Masha-la, Masha-la," came a twittering cry.

I looked up and saw the faró's twenty sons bearing down on me, their foreshortened legs churning along the hall. Still too young to have gained the enormous weight that marked their elders, the boys climbed upon me like little monkeys. I was a great favorite at court, using my Serpent's wit to construct wonder tales for their entertainment.

"Masha-la, tell us a story."

I held out the Rod and they fell back, astonished to see it in my hand. It put an end to our casual story sessions. "I must see your father, the great faró," I said.

They raced back down the hall, chittering and smacking their lips as the smell of the food in the dining commons drew them in. I followed, knowing that the adult Gipts would be there as well, partaking of one of their day-long feasts.

Two more black mercenaries opened the doors for me. Of a different tribe, these were tall and thin, the scarifications on their arms like jeweled bracelets of black beads. I nodded to them in passing. Their faces reflected nothing back.

The hall was full of feeding Gipts, served by their slimmer women. On the next to highest tier, there was a line of couches on which lay seven massive men, the faró's advisors. And on the high platform, overseeing them all, the mass of flesh that was the faró himself, one fat hand reaching towards a bowl of peeled grapes.

"Greetings, oh high and mighty faró," I said, my voice rising above the sounds in the hall.

The faró smiled blandly and waved a lethargic hand. The rings on his fingers bit deeply into the engorged flesh. It is a joke amongst the People that one can tell the age of a Gipt as one does a tree, by counting the rings. Once put on, the rings become embedded by the encroaching fat. The many gems on the faró's hand winked at me. He was very old.

"Masha-la," he spoke languidly, "it grieves me to see you with the Rod of your people."

"It grieves me even more, mighty faró, to greet you with my news. But it is something which you must know." I projected my voice so that even the women in the kitchens could hear.

"Say on," said the faró.

"These death-bearing angels are not so much a plague upon the People

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but are rather using us as an appetizer for Giptanese flesh," I said. "Soon they will tire of our poor, ribey meat and gorge themselves on yours. Unless. . . ." I paused.

"Unless what, *Leader of the People*?" asked the faró.

I was in trouble. Still, I had to go on. There was no turning back, and this the faró knew. "Unless my people take a small vacation across the great sea, returning when the angels are gone. We will bring more of the People and the monument will be done on time."

The faró's greedy eyes glittered. "For no more than the promised amount?"

"It is for your own good," I whined. The faró expects petitioners to whine. It is in the contract under "Deportment Rules."

"I do not believe you, Masha-la," said the faró. "But you tell a good story. Come back tomorrow."

That saved my own skin, but it did not help the rest. "These angels *will* be after the sons of the faró," I said. It was a guess. Only the sons and occasional and unnecessary still women went out in the daylight. I am not sure why I said it. "And once they have tasted Gipt flesh . . ." I paused.

There was a sudden and very real silence in the room. It was clear I had overstepped myself. It was clearer when the faró sat up. Slowly that mammoth body raised with the help of two of the black guards. When he was seated upright, he put on his helm of office, with the decorated flaps that draped against his ears. He held out his hand and the guard on the right pushed the Great Gipt Crook into his pudgy palm.

"You and your People will not go to the sea this year before time," intoned the faró. "But tomorrow *you* will come to the kitchen and serve up your hand for my soup."

He banged the crook's wide bottom on the floor three times. The guard took the crook from his hand. Then exhausted by the sentence he had passed on my hand—I hoped they would take the left, not the right—he lay down again and started to eat.

I walked out, through doors opened by the shadow men, whose faces I forgot as soon as I saw them, out into the early eve, made blood red by the setting sun.

I could hear the patter of the faró's sons after me, but such was my agitation that I did not turn to warn them back. Instead I walked down the street composing a psalm to the cunning of my right hand, just in case.

The chittering of the boys behind me increased and, just as I came to the door of Isak's house, I turned and felt the weight of wind from above. I looked up and saw an angel swooping down on me, wings fast to its side in a perilous stoop like a hawk upon its prey. I fell back against the

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doorpost, reaching my right hand up in supplication. My fingers scraped against the nailed-up feathers. Instinctively I grabbed them and held them clenched in my fist. My left hand was down behind me scrabbling in the dirt. It mashed something on the ground. And then the angel was on me and my left hand joined the right pushing up against the awful thing.

Angel claws were inches from my neck when something stopped the creature's rush. Its wings whipped out and slowed its descent, and its great golden-haired head moved from side to side.

It was then that I noticed its eyes. They were as blue as the Gipt sky—and as empty. The angel lifted its beautiful blank face upward and sniffed the air, pausing curiously several times at my outstretched hands. Then, pumping its mighty wings twice, it lifted away from me, banked sharply to the right, and took off in the direction of the palace where the faró's sons scattered before it like twigs in the wind.

Two times the angel dropped down and came up with a child in its claw. I leaped to my feet, smeared the top of my stick with the dung and feathers and chased after the beast, but I was too late. It was gone, a screaming boy in each talon, heading towards its aerie where it would share its catch.

What could I tell the faró that he would not already know from the hysterical children ahead of me? I walked back to my own house, carrying my stick above my head. It would protect me as no totem had before. I knew now what only dead men had known, the learning which they had gathered as the claws carried them above the earth! *Angels are blind and hunt by smell.* If we but smeared our sticks with their dung and feathers and carried this above our heads, we would be safe; we would be, in their "eyes," angels.

I washed my hands carefully, called the minon to me, and told them of my plan. We would go this night, as a people, to the faró. We would tell him that his people were cursed by our God now. The angels would come for them, but not for us. He would have to let us go.

It was the children's story that convinced him, as mine could not. Luck had it that the two boys taken were his eldest. Or perhaps not luck. As they were older, they were fatter—and slower. The angel came upon them first.

Their flesh must have been sweet. In the morning we could hear the hover of angel wings outside, like a vast buzzing. Some of the People wanted to sneak away by night.

"No," I commanded, holding up the Rod of Leadership, somewhat darkened by the angel dung smeared over the top. "If we sneak away like thieves in the night, we will never work for the Gipts again. We must

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go tomorrow morning, in the light of day, through the cloud of angels. That way the faró and his people will know our power and the power of our God."

"But," said Josu, "how can we be sure your plan will work? It is a devious one at best. I am not sure even I believe you."

"Watch!" I said and I opened the door, holding the Rod over my head. I hoped that what I believed to be so was so, but my heart felt like a marble in the mouth.

The door slammed behind me and I knew faces pressed against the curtains of each window.

And then I was alone in the courtyard, armed with but a stick and a prayer.

The moment I walked outside, the hover of angels became agitated. They spiraled up and, like a line of enormous insects, winged towards me. As they approached, I prayed and put the stick above my head.

The angels formed a great circle high over my head and one by one they dipped down, sniffed around the top of the Rod, then flew back to place. When they were satisfied, they wheeled off, flying in a phalanx, towards the farthest hills.

At that, the doors of the houses opened, and the People emerged. Josu was first, his own stick, sticky with angel dung, in hand.

"Now, quick," I said, "before the faró can see what we are doing, grab up what dung and feathers you find from that circle and smear it quickly on the doorposts of the houses. Later, when we are sure no one is watching, we can scrape it onto totems to carry with us to the sea."

And so it was done. The very next morning, with much blowing of horns and beating of drums, we left for the sea. But none of the faró's people or his mercenaries came to see us off, though they followed us later.

But that is another story altogether, and not a pretty tale at all. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 22)

SOLUTION TO DIRAC'S SCISSORS

Assume you twisted the scissors 720 degrees clockwise, as viewed from the ceiling. Hold the scissors in your right hand. With your left hand take the center of the twisted strands, carry the string up on the far side of the scissors, pass the loop over the scissors and allow it to fall on your

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right arm. Take the scissors in your left hand. Release the scissors with your right hand, allowing the loop of string to fall. Raise the scissors. You are back where you started. The tangles have vanished!

You don't have to have a pair of scissors to demonstrate the puzzle. Any object will do, and any number of strings can be attached to it provided there are more than two. The free ends may be fastened to any spots in the room. Imagine, for example, a coffee pot with a dozen elastic strings that run from the pot to any places on any wall or on the ceiling or floor. Rotate the pot 360 degrees around any axis. No manipulation of the elastic cords will restore the original structure. Rotate the pot 720 degrees and the restoration is always possible.

The strings model what topologists call "fiber bundles." If you care to learn more about how Dirac's scissors trick ties into fiber bundles and quantum mechanics, check "Fiber Bundles and Quantum Theory," by Herbert J. Bernstein and Anthony V. Phillips in *Scientific American*, July 1981, and letters on the article in the following October and December issues. See also the Amateur Scientist department of the same magazine, December 1975, for a description of a practical application of Dirac's scissors to an ingenious mechanical device that allows a cable to be rotated continuously without twisting it. Other good references include "The Spinor Spannor," by Ethan D. Bolker, *American Mathematical Monthly*, November 1973, and "On a String Problem of Dirac," by M.H.A. Newman, in the *Journal of the London Mathematical Society*, July 1942.

There are endless anecdotes about Dirac. The best known involves the sister of Eugene Wigner, a Nobel prize-winning physicist. Shortly after Dirac married Wigner's sister, he was entertaining an old friend who had not yet heard of Dirac's marriage. I'll let George Gamow finish the story, as he tells it in *Thirty Years that Shook Physics*. The friend "found with Dirac an attractive woman who served tea and then sat down comfortably on a sofa. . . . 'Oh,' exclaimed Dirac. 'I forgot to introduce you. This is Wigner's sister.' "

Gamow reports another occasion on which Dirac was visiting Peter Kapitza, the famous Russian physicist. Dirac became absorbed in watching Mrs. Kapitza knit. A few hours after his visit he rushed back to the house to tell Mrs. Kapitza he had been thinking about the toplogical aspects of her knitting, and had discovered a second way to do it. After he showed her the second method, Mrs. Kapitza informed him that he had reinvented purling.

Our final story, again from Gamow, concerns the question and answer period following one of Dirac's lectures. Someone stood up to say, "I don't understand how you derived that formula on the left side of the blackboard."

Can you guess how Dirac replied? His response is on page 123.

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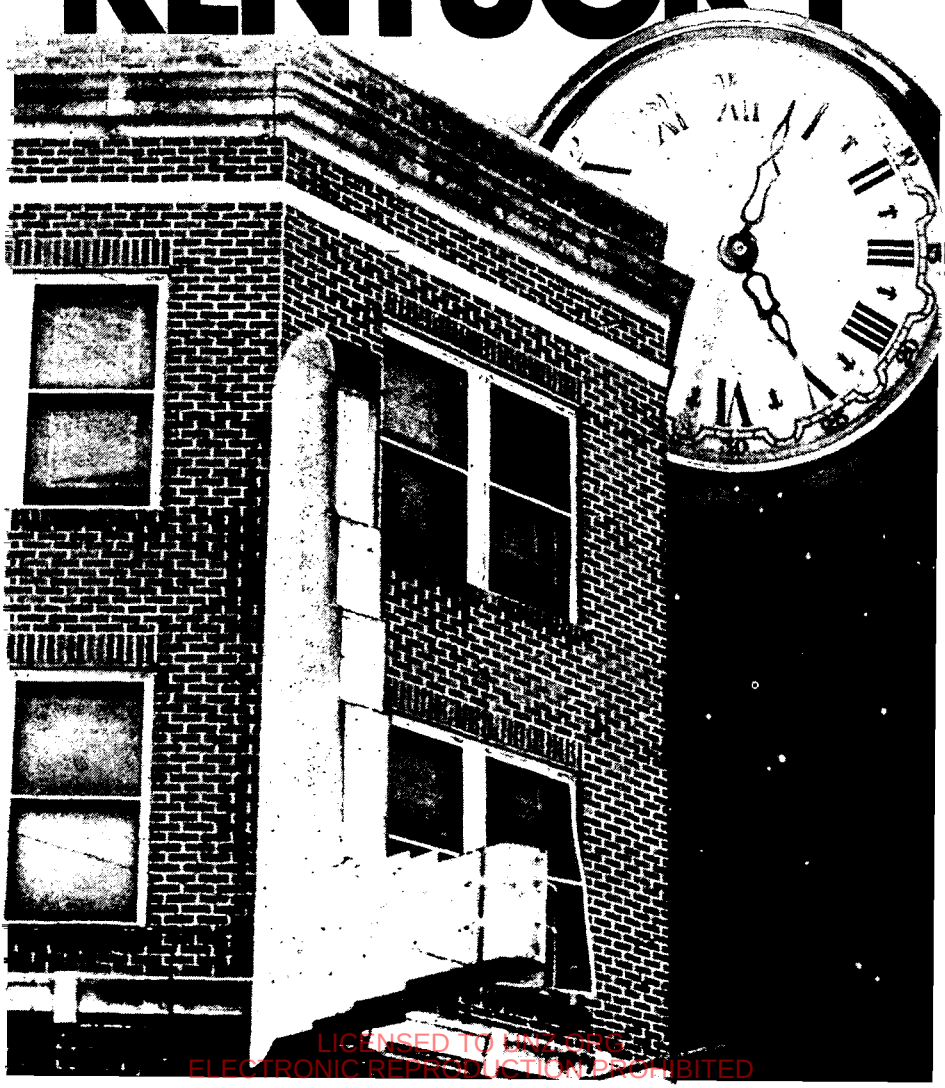
by Terence M. Green

ASHLAND, KENTUCKY



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The author of this wistful tale
lives in Toronto, Ontario.
He has just finished a novel, *Barking Dogs*,
and is beginning a new one.
Mr. Green's short fiction has appeared
in *IAsfm* and *F&SF*.

art: J. K. Potter

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I

My mother died on March 14, 1984. It had been inevitable, as all such things are inevitable, and although it had not been unexpected, it nevertheless left me in shock. A large chunk of the past was gone. A large chunk of *my* past.

Gone.

She had been hospitalized just before Christmas. Accelerating arteriosclerosis, recurring strokes, and crippling arthritis had rendered her virtually immobile. She was seventy-four.

I am forty. Soon I will be forty-one.

But these are mere numbers. And what numbers measure, especially those linked to Time, I have never understood. And now I understand them less.

She died, they say, of heart failure.

II

When I visited her in January, she was rambling. She upset me so much that I cried. There were three other beds in the hospital room, and now I realize that I can't recall anything about their occupants. I only recall how, that day, I got up and pulled the sliding curtains around the bed so that we could be alone, so that I could hold her hand.

Her fingers were welded into the timeless claw of the aged, the skin on her hand stretched thinly across bony knuckles. Lesions and brittle remnants of skin cancers dotted her forearm.

But her eyes . . . It was her eyes—glazed, darting, frightened, the blue diluted as with a watery thinner. . . .

"Jack was here," she told me.

I frowned. "Jack?"

"And my father." She nodded. The eyes darted.

I stared at her. Jack was her brother. She hadn't seen him for about fifty years. Her father had died thirty years ago.

"Jack was here," I repeated, finally.

She nodded emphatically. The eyes never ceased their wild dance. Her hand gripped mine.

"I told him not to go."

I nodded, understanding.

"But he went anyway." Another nod; a pause. "He was always a good boy. We were good children. Never got into any trouble. Always did what we were told."

I felt the frail bones of her hand, watched the frantic eyes jump about, saw my mother as I had never seen her.

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"He's coming back tomorrow."
I nodded.
Her eyes darted.

III

I returned the next day. The wildness had passed. In its stead, tubes suspended from a bottle by her bedside snaked into her arm.

"How are you today?" I sat down, took her hand in mine.

"Okay." The word was soft and dry. Her eyes, I noted, were steadier.

I tried a smile. "What do you think about all this?" I indicated, with an open hand and a postured inspection, our surroundings: the beds with hand cranks, the crisp white sheets, the gray tile floors, the plastic wrist-bracelets.

My mother smiled. She was back from wherever she had been yesterday. "I don't want to die," she said. "Nobody wants to die. But," she added, "I don't want to live like this either."

I nodded, comforted by the clarity of her answer. She understood what was happening, saw no solution, expressed it simply.

How much more time?

"Who would you like to see? Is there anybody you'd like to see?"

Her eyes focused on me calmly. "Oh, yes."

"Who?"

"Jack," she said.

IV

My parents had moved to their new home in North Toronto in 1929. At the time, so I have been told, there were fields all about and a creek within half a block. The fields are gone; no one is sure today where exactly the creek was. The most general consensus is that it's under the city-run parking lot that serves the subway—which is now the proposed site of the new police station. My father still lives there. Alone.

That afternoon, on my way home from the hospital, I drove to the house where I had grown up—the house I had left twenty years ago. It *looked* like a house that an old man lived in, alone: peeling paint on the eaves, a pitted and corroded aluminum screen door, snow unshoveled in the driveway. I knew he was in there. He is always in there.

V

"Tell me about Jack."

My father lit a cigarette, holding it in his right hand. He jammed his

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left hand in his belt, as was his habit. He is eighty years old now. I am astonished at his white hair, his groping movements, the thickness of his glasses.

"We don't know what happened to Jack," he said.

"I know."

"He left in the 1930s."

I nodded. We sat opposite one another at the green, arborite kitchen table. "Why did he leave? What happened?"

He inhaled on the cigarette deeply, then let it expel slowly. "What did your mother say?"

"Nothing much. I asked her who she'd like to see. She said 'Jack.' That's all."

He nodded. "Things were never settled. That's why. Things have to be settled, or they never go away."

I waited. "What happened?" I asked. "Nobody ever told me."

He paused. "I'm not sure," he said.

VI

He lit another cigarette. It was time, he knew, for confidences. "There were only the two of them, you know. Just Margaret and Jack. Jack was two years younger—born in 1911. We all lived on Berkley Street together. That's how I got to know your mother. We were neighbors." He smiled, remembering something. "We've been married fifty-four years now."

I smiled. "I know."

"Their mother died when your mother was just a kid. As a result, your mother ended up playing mother to Jack. Margaret adored her father, but the old man, as I understand it, wasn't much help. He always had a big cigar, always boasted. He didn't like me much either," he added. "I remember him saying once, to me—'you don't like me, do you?' I told him that I didn't." He paused. "It's all too bad now. Doesn't seem to matter much either." He lifted the cigarette to his lips and gazed off at the wall behind me.

I waited for him to continue. The smoke spiraled patiently toward the ceiling of the kitchen.

"The old man left Jack and Margaret with various of his sisters. He was incapable of raising two kids on his own. He was an only son, in the midst of a flock of sisters, and he was spoiled rotten." My father looked at me. "Always had a big cigar," he said, "but always lived in rented rooms. Those were different times, the 1920s." He sighed. "You want a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"Me neither. Bad for your heart."

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I smiled, looking at the cigarette.

"The two kids lived with the old man off and on from that point. But half the time he was never home. They raised themselves. And Margaret played mother to Jack. They were very close." He switched topics suddenly. "Do you remember the old man? Your mother's father?"

"No. Nothing."

"He died when you were three. Died of a heart attack on the street car, on Christmas Day, coming up here to see us. And that was it."

"That was what?"

"The end of the line for your mother. There was no one else. Her mother and father were dead. Her brother had left and hadn't been heard of for years."

"There was you. There was me."

"Yes. But it wasn't the same. The past was gone for her. Do you understand? The past was gone. No one wants to give up the past. At least, no one I know." The smoke hung in tendrils between us.

VII

His eyes were watery behind the thick lenses. The skin of his forehead was discolored and flaking. He hadn't been eating properly. "Jack was jealous of me," he said.

I listened, without changing expression. I wanted to hear it all. It was time to hear it all. And it was time for him to tell it.

"Your mother married me when she was twenty—when Jack was eighteen. They'd been living alone for a while at that point. The old man had remarried—a girl half his age. The step-mother didn't want his kids. In fact, I was never sure why she wanted him. So he abandoned them for her. This was the 1920s. Family life was strong then. Nobody did those kind of things. At least," he amended, "nobody I knew. So they lived down the street—Berkley Street—together."

"Where did my—" I paused over the word, ". . . grandfather, live?"

"Out in the west end. Nobody had cars. It was a long way." He inhaled the smoke. It drifted out as he talked. "I guess she chased him because he talked big and smoked a big cigar."

"Who?" I wasn't sure I was following him.

"The girl he married."

"Oh."

"She died three years later, giving birth to their second child."

I was silent.

"It was the 1920s."

I turned my head to look out the kitchen window—to the parking lot that would become the police station. It was beginning to snow.

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"So then he had two more kids, and no mother to look after them, and it was all starting again." Then he stared at me, hard. "And he was still living in rented rooms."

VIII

"She wants to see him."

"Who?" The thin, white eyebrows wrinkled.

"Jack."

He had caught the thread again. "He left in 1932. I think. We never saw him again."

"Where did he go? Why did he leave?"

"He left because there was nothing here for him. He was a young man, about twenty-one. He had no use for the old man; he could see through him. When Margaret married me he was alone. I think he felt she had abandoned him. It wasn't fair." He shrugged. "But then, nothing is fair." The cigarette was placed between the thin, dry lips once more. "Your mother felt bad. Felt guilty, I think." He looked at me. "Try to see it from Jack's point of view. His mother dies; his father's run off and married this young thing; his big sister marries the guy down the street. It's the Dirty Thirties. Nothing for him here."

I shifted in my chair, crossed my legs.

"He left the country. Left Canada. Went down into the States. Last we heard of him he was in Detroit."

"Why Detroit?"

"Detroit was turning out cars. There were jobs."

"Did he write?"

"Once, that I remember."

"Did anyone try to find him?"

"The Mounties tried to find him."

I raised my eyebrows.

"RCMP came to the door here in 1939 looking for him. Wanted to know where Jack Radey was. He hadn't answered his draft notice."

I waited.

"They never found him either." He drew deeply on the cigarette. "You sure you don't want a coffee?"

I got up and put on the kettle.

"Good. I've changed my mind too. The hell with my heart."

I stood, looking out the window at the parking lot. The sky was gray and the snow was still falling. *A creek*, I thought. *Under there. And soon, a police station. Layer upon layer. Impossible to find it.*

"When the old man died, they found some correspondence between him and a private investigator he'd hired to find Jack. It was one of the few

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bright spots your mother could find at the time. The fact that the old man had made some kind of effort to find his own son—that it might have even bothered him—was something he never let any of us know."

"What did it say?"

"The trail had run dry. That's what it said. He was gone."

The kettle began to whistle softly.

IX

When the phone rang that evening, it was my father. "I found something you might be interested in."

"What is it?"

"The letter from Jack that I remembered. And a card from your mother to him that was returned unclaimed."

"How old are they?"

"Just a minute." There was a pause. I could picture him pushing his glasses up onto his forehead and squinting at the paper in his hand. "1934," he said. "You want 'em?"

The excitement I felt was all out of proportion to the news. There was no reason for it. "Yes," I whispered.

"I'll keep 'em for you."

"I'll be right over." I couldn't wait.

X

The envelopes were yellowed. The one from Jack was postmarked Feb. 22, 1934, Detroit, Michigan. In the upper right corner, it sported a purple, three cent Washington stamp, and the ironic cancellation imprint: "Notify Your Correspondents Of Change Of Address." It was hotel stationery. The upper left read: "Return in Five Days to VERMONT HOTEL, 138 W. Columbia, Detroit, Michigan." It had been torn open at the end. It was addressed to my mother, here, at the only address she had ever known after she had married my father.

The other envelope was postmarked Toronto, Ontario, 8:30 P.M., April 29, 1934. It was addressed to Mr. Jack F. Radey, % Vermont Hotel, etc., and across the bottom there was a Detroit postmark dated May 3, and a stamped imprint that read: "Return to Writer UNCLAIMED." Somebody else had scrawled in pen: "Try Washington Hotel."

"What's the F. stand for?"

"Francis. Your brother Ron has the same middle name. Your mother's choice."

I pulled the letter from Jack to my mother from the torn end of the envelope. It consisted of four faded sheets of Vermont Hotel stationery,

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complete with stylized letterhead. In the upper left corner it read: "Phone Cherry 4421"; the upper right bore the announcement: "Rates $1.00 and up." The handwriting was quite legible, and in pencil. It was dated February 22/34.

Dear Margaret:

Received your letter OK, and sure was tickled pink to hear from you. I'm sorry to hear Ronnie has been sick and I hope he is real well and yelling his head off when you receive this.

I must be going "Goof" or something. I was starting to think you had deserted me, and here I had sent you the wrong address. It's funny we didn't get your other letters or the Valentines. They must have been lost in the mail.

Gee—Margaret I like it real well here. If anything ever happened now that I had to go back I think it would break my heart—no foolin'. I am working in the picture business for the largest and best paying outfit in town, and I like it.

Do you know that coming here has given me an entirely new slant on life. I seem more anxious to be somebody than I ever have in my whole existence. Things seem to be pretty fair here, and you can live cheaper, and make more money than you can in Toronto.

I received a letter from a friend in Toronto today. The one that phoned you. She said you wished I hadn't come over here with Carmen as he may prove a bad influence. Well forget it—he won't; and besides I've met, and mingled with so many fellows who are that way that one more couldn't make any difference. So stop worrying about me being led astray. So far as drinking is concerned I haven't been doing any. I am to busy makeing money, and trying to get somewhere. The only thing I'm sore about is that I didn't come here about four years ago. I'd have had a lot more now to be thankful for.

I bought myself a nice new pair of shoes last Saturday and a couple of shirts etc. and I hope to have a new suit in a week or so. I need one badly.

You know Marg the secret of the whole thing is I came over here on my uppers. By the time I had payed Mrs. Scott in Toronto, and a few other little items I was broke. I was determined to come over here though. The boys I worked with there gave me a rotten deal, and thats no fairy tale. I borrowed a little money from Carmen, (thats where he got the idea to come along) and I've payed him back every bit of that right now. That isn't all either—cause I really am going to make something out of myself. I mean it Marg.

*This all may seem strange to you—*me *talking this way, but I have to tell someone how I feel and you are the only person I feel I can tell without being laughed at for dreaming. This is all just between you*

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and I, Marg. I wouldn't want anyone else to know how I was fixed or what a tough time I had for the first week in Detroit. Everything is going to be OK now though, and pretty soon I will be able to send you and the children and Tommy something from the U.S.A.

I sure hope everyone is well, and if any of my acquaintances are asking for me tell them I'm in China.

I've been working around Royal Oak—Gee the "Shrine" is beautiful Marg. I also make it a point to get to mass on Sunday. Write me real soon.

Lots of Love.

Jack.

I put the letter down and looked across at my father, who had been quietly watching me. "Have you read this?"

"Yes."

"Where did you find them?"

"In the trunk, at the foot of the bed. At the bottom."

"What did you make of it?"

He shrugged. "Not much."

"He said he worked in the picture business? What did he mean?"

"Margaret told me that he was working as a sidewalk photographer down there. She'd heard this from a friend of his here."

"Sidewalk photographer?" I blinked.

"You know—one of them guys who used to snap your picture, then come up to you and offer to sell you prints when they were developed."

I continued to look uninformed.

"No," he sighed. "I guess you don't know. Polaroids, Instamatics, video replays . . . of course you don't know."

"I think I've seen them in the movies. Old movies." I smiled.

He smiled back. "Yeah. Old ones."

"Doesn't sound like much of a job."

"It wasn't."

"I thought he went to Detroit to work in the car industry."

He shrugged. "I don't know what happened. Sometimes," he said, "things don't happen the way you plan."

XI

I opened the envelope that had been returned unclaimed. Because I had never seen birthday cards from the 1930s, what I found intrigued me. The stationery and greeting card industries, I reflected, had shifted gears significantly over the past fifty years. There were two birthday cards inside—not birthday cards as we know them—but birthday cards of the era: two flat, unfolded cards about four inches square, with elab-

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orate, embossed colored drawings of a bird in a garden and a galleon on the high seas respectively. The former read: "Birthday Greetings Dear Brother," the other, "To the Nicest Uncle on his Birthday." Each sported a genial epigraph, and was signed by my mother, for herself and for the children. On the back of hers was a P.S.—*"Why don't you write?"*

Accidentally, I tore the envelope putting them back. It tore easily.

"And this was it?" I asked.

My father nodded.

"You never heard from him again?"

He shook his head.

"She's going to die, you know."

The eyes behind the thick lashes weakened. "I know."

"She wants to see him."

He shrugged, looked away. "He's gone. He never came back." Then he looked at me. "What can we do?"

I stood up, walked to the kitchen window, stared out at the snow-covered parking lot. Beyond it, the traffic inched along Eglinton Avenue.

XII

I spent every afternoon for the next week in two places. First, I would visit my mother; then I would drive to the main branch of the Toronto Public Library at Bloor and Yonge. There I would pore over an atlas, copying down names of cities, towns, communities in and around the Detroit area, and as far south as Toledo. The litany had become familiar: Windsor, Pontiac, Wyandotte, Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Flint, Lansing, Grand Rapids—even Saginaw and Bay City—plus numerous others. Having made my daily list, I would then ask for the white pages of the communities' phone books, which were all filed on microfiche, from the librarian, and seat myself in front of one of the viewers, scanning them for any mention of the surname Radey. It was likely, I realized, that he was dead. But it didn't seem too unlikely that he may have married, may even have had children. The name—"Radey"—proved remarkably uncommon, which was to my advantage.

My list of names and addresses grew, slowly but steadily.

By the week's end I had progressed from the Detroit area to major cities in general, including New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Houston, New Orleans, San Francisco, L.A., San Diego. . . . I had also begun to realize the impossibility of my self-appointed task. How, I wondered, could I hope to succeed where the RCMP and private investigators had failed? The answer, I knew, was that I probably would not. What I would need was a lightning-bolt of

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luck, pure and simple. There were too many places I could never cover, too many years that had passed.

Yet, I persisted. I wanted to give this to my mother. It was what she wanted. The attempt needed to be made.

My final list consisted of some fifty or so names. A couple were even J. Radeys. One in Kansas City was a John F. Radey.

I wrote my letter.

Dear Sir or Madame:

I am trying to trace a relative—for strictly family reasons—with the surname Radey. I am trying to find Jack (John Francis) Radey, born in Toronto, in 1911. His father was Martin Radey (deceased), born 1882 circa Toronto, and his mother was Margaret Anne Curtis (deceased), born Toronto, 1878. He had one sibling—a sister, Margaret, born Toronto, 1909.

Margaret, Jack's sister (now Mrs. Thomas Dakin), is my mother.

If Jack is still alive, perhaps this letter can reach him. Perhaps he married and had children, some of whom might read this. Xeroxing and networking of this letter is encouraged. If this letter should reach anyone with any helpful information, please feel free to call me collect, as soon as possible. Any information would be appreciated.

Many thanks.

Sincerely, etc.

I made a hundred copies, mailing as many as I could out into the void.

XIII

It's not that there were no replies. On the contrary, I received about a dozen cards and letters, most merely assuring me that they could be of no help. A card came from Cleveland from a family that informed me that their name had been legally changed in 1953 from a long Polish name; the closest I seemed to come was a letter from a lady in Minnesota:

My father, Charles, to whom your letter was addressed, died last May, a couple weeks short of his eightieth birthday. I have two brothers—Todd, in Tallahassee, Florida, and Paul Michael, of Evansville, Indiana.

My father was raised in the Kansas area. We know very little about his family. We never knew any of them. As far as I know there were no brothers or sisters. As far as I can determine, he had an unhappy childhood and never seemed to want to talk about it—so, I respected that.

I'm sorry that I can't be of some help to you. Good luck in your search.

* * *

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I wrote to the two brothers.
No answer.

Another brief note arrived as the weeks passed, from Haddonfield, New Jersey.

Dear Sir:

Your letter about Jack Radey was brought to my attention.

A friend of mine who is interested in genealogy suggested that you advertise in the magazine, GENEALOGY HELPER, *which is published by the Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., at 1001 N. Calvert Street, Baltimore, MD.*

You may want to forward a copy of your letter. They might be willing to publish it.

I sent them the letter. They published it.
Nothing happened.

XIV

My mother died. I was unable to bring Jack back for her. I had failed.
Time. It was devouring us all, burying us in stratified layers, impervious to archaeological probes.

XV

The snow melted, leaving puddles of slush that glinted in the sunshine. Then the puddles dried up and blew away with the April breezes.

I stood at my father's kitchen window gazing out at the bulldozers and cranes that were excavating the parking lot—transforming it into an enormous maw that would serve to support the new police station. In my hand, a mug of instant coffee steamed casually, emitting small rays of warmth.

Behind me, saying nothing, my father smoked a cigarette with his right hand. His left hand was jammed in his belt.

XVI

It was the eighth of May when my father phoned. "I'd like you to come over."

"Anything wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong." There was a pause. "At least, I don't think so."

"What is it?"

"A letter came today. For Margaret."

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"Who's it from?"

"I opened it." He seemed to be apologizing.

I waited.

"It's from Jack."

I couldn't speak.

"I said it's from Jack."

"Jack?" My mind was numbed. "He's alive?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What do you mean you don't know?" The words were tumbling out before I could sift them. "You're holding his letter, aren't you?" My voice had become a whisper. It was incredible. Everything seemed incredible.

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"Leo . . . listen to me for a minute." I could hear his breathing as he waited. A second tripped by. Two. Three. "Will you listen?" He was breathing heavily.

I calmed myself. "Yes."

"It came in the mail today. Along with all the usual stuff."

"Where is he?" The question blurted out before I could stifle it.

"It's postmarked Toledo, Ohio."

"He's in Toledo?" It was both exclamation and question.

"I don't know if he's there, Leo. . . ."

"What is it? What *is* it?"

"The letter's fifty years old, Leo. It's postmarked April 30, 1934. It's written in pencil, just like the other one. The date on the letter is April 29, 1934. It was written and mailed fifty years ago, Leo, but it came in the mail today. Today!"

I closed my eyes and waited for the explanation to present itself to me. Instead, I saw two birthday cards, one with a bird in a garden, the other with a galleon on the high seas.

XVII

My father was strangely composed when he handed me the letter. I wondered whether it was because he had had time to calm himself, or if it was part of the realm of old age to bear surprises with greater dispassion.

In the upper right-hand corner was the same purple three cent Washington stamp.

The postmark was as he had said.

The letter was two sheets of seven by ten-and-a-half; atop the date on the letter was the address 117-17th Street, Toledo.

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Dear Margaret:

I certain owe you an apology, and I suppose I owe all the rest of the family one too. It just seems as though the things I should do, I never get around to, and the ones I shouldn't are always being done.

I got your letter a couple of weeks ago, and I've started to write to you several times. I get about half way thru and then something happens. How are you all doing, and how is Father?

I didn't have such a good winter, but things are starting to look up now. I lost my car, and just about everything else I had just before Christmas. I had a wreck, and was laid up for a while, but I'm OK now, and thinking about another car. I guess I'll be smart to stay away from them for a while though.

I was sure glad to hear from you. Don't think I'm an awful heel for not writing sooner, but just try and realize what a careless brother you have. I would have dropped you a line at Xmas, but I was in pretty bad shape—physically and financially, so I just lay low and hoped everything would be allright.

I've been in Toledo now for two weeks. How are the children—Boy I'll bet they are getting big. I'd love to see them. If you get a chance to come to Detroit some weekend why bring them along, and let me know beforehand so I'll meet you there.

I haven't seen anyone you know for so long that I feel like an orphan. I'm still with Hartican. I was away from him for a while during the winter, but started back again. His picture business is still the biggest. I'm working with a chap named McMaster a real nice fellow. He's been married about a year and a half, and they were blessed with a bouncing baby boy about three weeks ago. He (Mac I mean) is just ga-ga about the baby. He has me talking like one.

Say—that was a dirty dig about those cards you have for me. You'd think you hadn't heard from me in over a year. Send me some snapshots of yourself and the kiddies. I'm still carrying the one of you and Loretta in your bathing suits and Ronnie and Anne on the bikes.

Say Hello to Father and all the gang for me, and write me sooner than I did you. Try and forgive me for not writeing sooner—cause you know how a fellow slips once in a while. I'm glad to hear Tommy is doing well and has a new car, and tell Mrs. Dakin I hope she feels like herself soon.

I'm "gonna" close now and get some sleep. So long and

Lots of Love

Jack.

I left the letter on the kitchen table in front of my father and went to the window. In the excavation pit, the foundations had been poured.

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XVIII

The next letter arrived on June 23. I hung up the phone after receiving my father's call and drove over to his house in a daze.

This one was postmarked June 18, 1934, from Bucyrus, Ohio. The envelope bore the imprint of some roadside inn—or hotel—or possibly even a motel. I wasn't even certain if such things existed in the 1930s. Perhaps, I thought, it's merely a rooming house: "THE HIGHWAY," it read, "On The Nation's Main Thoroughfare, 'The Lincoln Highway,' BUCYRUS, OHIO."

The letter consisted of three sheets of six by nine-and-a-half yellowed stationery, with the same letterhead as adorned the envelope. The upper left corner boasted: "Modern," the upper right, "Fireproof." I glanced once more at the envelope. A red two-cent Washington was aligned with a green one-cent counterpart. I read the letter. It was dated, in pencil, June 18/34.

Dear Margaret:

The first thing I want to do is apologize for not writing sooner. You know how I am about letters though.

I'm still with Hartican of Detroit, but its so long since I've seen the office that I almost forget what he looks like.

How are all the folks in Toronto? Say "Hello" to all the gang around the house for me.

Have you been batheing this summer? I suppose Ronnie and Anne are both expert swim-champs by now.

There isn't very much to tell, as I've been hitting small towns all along the line. If the next one is as dead as this is I'll go crazy.

I don't know where I'm going from here, but we will be leaving in a few days. I'll let you know my next address in time for you to drop a line. Let me know how Father is getting along. I've lost his address.

Things are just about the same with me, I'm not making a fortune but I will one of these days.

I'm "gonna" beat it now and get something to eat.

Lots of Love

Your Brother

Jack.

We were quiet for a long time in the kitchen. Finally, I looked at my father. "Why is this happening?" I asked. I waited for paternal wisdom, for a flippant retort, for exposure of some implausible and outrageous scheme. I watched him frown, and waited.

His eyes were focused on the wall behind me. I glanced sidewise to see what might be there. There was nothing. "Things have to be settled," he said. "Or they never go away."

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XIX

At home, I dug my road atlas out of a pile of litter in a corner of the basement, and sat down to peruse it.

I found Bucyrus. It was north of Columbus, north of Marion, a tiny speck on Highway 4.

Bucyrus. I let the name roll softly in my brain.

He was headed south. Detroit. Toledo. Bucyrus.

On the Nation's Main Thoroughfare, "The Lincoln Highway."

Was it happening fifty years ago? Or was it happening now?

I knew the answer. It was both.

He was moving, had moved, is moving, deep into the heart of America. It was clear. America: The Melting Pot. Canada: The Event Horizon.

Down The Lincoln Highway. Assimilated. Ingurgitated.

Then and now.

And tomorrow.

XX

The letter that arrived July 5 was the briefest—written on a torn piece of stationery. It was the last to arrive at my father's house. It was from Ashland, Kentucky. The hotel this time was called The Scott Hotel, and the letterhead underlined its features: "Fire Proof—Moderate Price—Tub and Shower Baths." It had been posted July 1, 1934.

Dear Margaret:

Just a line to ask how you are, and how things are going in Toronto. I am doing pretty well down here. I have my own car now, have had it for a week, a Dodge Roadster. How is Tommy and the kiddies? Say Hello to Father for me.

I'll be in touch.

Love

Jack.

XXI

I usually take my holidays in August. I like the weather, the heat, the end of summer. I usually head north, rent a cottage, do some fishing. The splash of a smallmouth bass taking a surface lure on an August evening can make the hairs on my neck stand up straight.

This year, I headed south.

Detroit, Toledo, Bucyrus, Ashland.

I had to see for myself.

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XXII

I told my father. He nodded, sitting in the kitchen.

Outside, the girders rose up out of the pit, giving shape to the police station. The parking lot was gone.

XXIII

There was no Vermont Hotel in Detroit. There were Holiday Inns, Hyatts, Hiltons. An office building stood on the site where 138 W. Columbia would have been.

I drove on.

XXIV

There was no 117-17th Street in Toledo. At least not any longer.

XXV

I took I-75 south from Toledo to Findlay, veered east on 15 to 23, then across 30 to Highway 4.

The Lincoln Highway. Bucyrus.

I tried to imagine it as Jack had seen it, leading into the splendor of America, offering him his fortune. A pleasant little burg. Sherwood Anderson country.

I drove back and forth along the main route twice, tasting, searching, looking for more than just THE HIGHWAY inn. In some way, I was looking for Jack.

He was not here though. J.C. Penney was here. So was First Federal Savings, Rexall Drugs, Halliwell Hardware, Kork 'N Kap Drive Thru, Radio Shack, H & R Block, and Holiday Inn. Gray and white Kiwanis garbage bins were strategically located to polish the exterior.

THE HIGHWAY was gone. Amish Cheese was still here.

I had no idea where Jack was.

That night, I stayed at the Holiday Inn.

XXVI

The next day, I got back onto 23 and took it all the way to Ashland, Kentucky. At Portsmouth, I crossed the Ohio River.

It was hot and humid, as only August can be.

I stopped at a Burger King for lunch, scanning the local phone books

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for a Scott Hotel. There was no listing. Instead of "Fire Proof—Moderate Price—Tub and Shower Baths," I was regaled with modern attractions: Color TV (24-hour movies); sauna baths; free in-room coffee; kingsize waterbeds; luxury rooms.... People stayed at the Ramada Inn in 1984—not the Scott.

I finished my lunch. I had come all this way to see, to try to understand.

Getting into my car, I began to drive, touring the streets casually, my arm resting on the open window ledge.

J.C. Penney was here too. So was Wendy's, McDonald's, and Arby's. Chevron Gas, McCreary Tires, Midas Mufflers. Dairy Cheer—Home of the Smashburger, ABC 'Drive Thru' Liquors. Sears. The Ashland Oil Company.

I made a left onto one of the short streets that ran north and south, joining the main thoroughfares, and I saw it. The Scott Hotel. A creaking rooming house, whose very foundation had shifted, giving it a perceptible list, out of plumb with its surroundings.

The sweat ran into my eyes. At least, I think it was the sweat. I may have been crying. I don't know.

XXVII

Opening my eyes, I blinked several times. It was still there, avatar of a bygone era, unassuming and pale.

The Scott Hotel.

I glanced at my watch. It was 3 P.M. Easing the car to the curb, I parked.

It was an accident that I had found it. At least, I thought it was an accident.

I got out, walked up to the dilapidated front porch, studied the moon-shaped wells in the three steps before me, and took them smoothly, arriving at the front door. A giant oval of beveled glass, frosted at the edges, was implanted in a heavy wooden frame, laden with innumerable coats of paint, the latest of which was a drab, olive green. A cast-iron knocker hung to the right of the glass, chest-high. I used it. Then I took a step back, waiting.

When the door was pulled open from within, a small, wiry woman in her fifties stood in the hallway. Her eyes were black and squinting. I was unable to see the end of the hall behind her.

For a moment we merely confronted one another. Then she spoke. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"I'm—" I was at a temporary loss. She smiled, tilting her head to one side. I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know what to ask. My journey—everything—seemed impossibly foolish.

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Yet there were the letters. I had them in the car—in the glove compartment. *They* were real. *They* existed.

I tried again. "I'm looking for—Jack Radey."

She continued smiling. "Oh yes." She stepped aside. "He's in his room. Second on your right, upstairs."

XXVIII

I knocked. The door opened.

Jack Radey stood before me, a young man in his early twenties. I knew it was him. I could tell by the jaw, the cheekbones, the dark, black hair. He was a Radey—my mother's brother.

My uncle.

"Yes?"

"Jack? Jack Radey?"

He smiled, puzzled. "Yes."

"I'm a friend of Margaret's. A friend of your sister."

His eyes brightened. "Way down here? You're kidding!" He moved back, inviting me inside. "C'mon in."

I went inside.

"Have a seat." He offered me the chair from the writing desk in the room.

"Thanks." He sat across from me on the bed. His shirt was plain white, open at the neck—the collar from another era; his pants were flannel—too warm for either the time of year or the place—with double pleated front.

"Do you live here?" he asked.

"No. I'm on vacation. Margaret knew I might get down here. She gave me your address. Asked me to drop in on you, say hello, make sure everything's all right."

He shook his head, smiling. His eyes were bright blue, like my mother's. "Good old Marg. Always keeping tabs on me. Watchin' out for little brother." He was both amused and pleased. Then his eyes met mine again. "I'm sorry—I didn't catch your name."

"Leo." He waited for a last name. When I didn't offer it, I added, "Just tell her Leo dropped by to see how you were, to see if there was any pressing news, next time you write."

He accepted that, rose from the bed and walked to the window with his hands in his pockets. "It's hot here. But I like it. I like the possibilities." He turned to stare at me, silhouetted in the light from the window, a young man, confronted with his future. "A man can make something of himself down here. Anything can happen." He moved away from the window so I could see the glow of hope on his face. "Do you know where Ashland is? Do you know where I could go from here?"

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I shrugged, not sure what the answer was.

"God . . ." He ran his hand through black, curly hair. "Anywhere," he said. "Anywhere." Then he turned back to stare out the window. "It's like the jumping off point to anywhere." He paused. "I'm on the edge of the Virginias, the Carolinas. I could go right through to Richmond or Norfolk, or up to Washington, Baltimore, Atlantic City. It's all ahead of me." He turned to face me again. "You tell Margaret I'm fine."

I stood up.

"Tell her everything's fine. Tell her I miss her." He offered his hand. I took it. His eyes sparkled.

"Tell Father I'm fine, too."

I nodded. "I will."

He smiled openly, warmly. "Nice meeting you, Leo."

I smiled in return. "Margaret wants you to stay in touch."

"I will."

He let me out. I went down the stairs and let myself out the front door. When I reached my car, I turned and gazed back at the Scott Hotel.

Upstairs, at the window where Jack had stared out, I saw an old man with white hair looking down at me. I got into my car. When I looked again, he was gone.

XXIX

That night, I slept in the Ramada Inn.

XXX

I left Ashland the next morning, crossed the Ohio, went along 52 to 23, and north. I had lunch at the Court Café in Bucyrus. Later, because it was hot, and because I was tired, I pulled off Highway 4—The Lincoln Highway—just south of number 20, had a Pepsi at a gas station, and read a poster for the Seneca Caverns.

No matter what had happened, I was still on my vacation. And I was in no hurry to rush home. Part of me wanted to dawdle, to think, to feel—to try to understand.

I got back in the car and followed the signs. Fifteen minutes later I pulled into a modest picnic area, parked, and walked into the rickety gift shop. The sign above the gift shop announced: "Enter the caves in here." I bought a ticket for the next tour.

I still didn't know what I was doing.

There were about twenty of us on the tour.

A local high school girl led us down the poured cement stairs. I felt

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the temperature drop into the fifties, felt the sweat cool on my skin. I left the upper world behind.

The cavern was not a solution cavern. It had been formed by an earthquake, millions of years ago—a giant crack in the earth. The roofs and floors were so juxtaposed that they would fit perfectly into one another.

The high school girl delivered her well-rehearsed speech at each point of interest. When we reached the bottom, we were introduced to "Old Mist'ry River," which, we were told, had defied all attempts to measure its depth or locate its source. The stream's only inhabitants were amphipods—half-inch long, shrimp-like creatures.

I asked her if it ever rose higher up into the caverns.

"During freshet thaw," she said. "Ten years ago, it rose right up to within ten feet of the entranceway. But," she added, "it always recedes again. It always drops back to its proper level."

I nodded, remembering my mother's words. *"Jack was here. And my father."*

Turning, we retraced our steps, up out of the cavern. I wanted to go home.

XXXI

The letters are no longer in my glove compartment. They have disappeared. I didn't notice until I was crossing the border from Detroit into Windsor.

I should be upset, but I'm not. I think I figured it out. My father figured it out before I left Toronto. In the kitchen that day, he had simplified it. Things have to be settled, or they never go away. ●

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Ever notice the debris that litters the roadside of our highways? If you took to looking out for shoes, you'd probably agree that something strange is going on there. Ron Wolfe is an entertainment writer, movie reviewer, and cartoonist for *The Tulsa Tribune*. His horror novel, *Old Fears* (co-written with John Wooley), has been optioned as a movie by Highgate Productions.

by Ron Wolfe

THE ONE-SHOE BLUES

art: Daniel R. Horne

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A sandal, a tennis shoe—and now, a cowboy boot.

Charlie picked up the boot, turning it one way and another. All he could see wrong with it was some wear on the heel.

Even so, it was in better shape than the scraggly Earth Shoes that had taken him through the worst of Texas and New Mexico, and he would have traded footgear, except there was only one boot.

He looked along the side of Arizona 60. The noon sun glinted from bits of glass, and here and there, a beer can. No boot.

He couldn't help wondering how there came to be just one cowboy boot alongside the highway. But Charlie had noticed as much before. Be going along, and glance toward the roadside, and what you see is a boot. Or before that, a sandal. A tennis shoe. A bowling shoe. A slipper.

And always just one . . .

Charlie tried thumbing a ride from an oncoming Buick, but the big car went barreling past him, stirring a rush of hot air.

He turned aside to keep from choking on the road dust that settled over him in a sweaty film. When he looked again, the Buick was part of the heat shimmer that settled over the highway going toward Globe.

Just as well, Charlie thought. He didn't like fat cat Buicks. He might not even have gotten in.

Charlie dropped the boot, leaving the mystery of it for another time.

He swallowed a mouthful of canteen water that tasted of hot metal.

He unslung the guitar from its beaded strap across his shoulder, then the canvas backpack. Charlie sat on the backpack, giving out the kind of groan that comes of miles and hard pavement, and years and hard times.

Charlie took care dusting off the guitar, getting it back into tune again. He never let it go very long without making sure it was all right. Even if he caught a ride straight to Los Angeles, there would be no reason for going without the guitar.

Charlie wasn't into mushrooms or stars, or any of that mystic stuff anymore. But he believed the guitar had a soul. Every guitar did. It was nothing but a six-string Gibson acoustic, but there was a heart to it someplace inside the sound box. He could have picked that guitar out of a million that looked just the same. It was like you could have any number of lovers, but in all the world, just one best friend.

He tried a few chords. He liked the purity of sound the guitar made outdoors, even out in the desert, stuck with no ride.

The chords began fitting together.

Charlie sometimes didn't know where the guitar was going to lead him. And now, after a start at Dan Fogelberg's "Language of Love," and a swing at Leo Kottke, it broke toward a blues sound.

The words and the music just fell into place, and Charlie was singing

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along, and at the same time trying to remember what it was, because it was that good.

Got the one-shoe blues, the one-shoe blues
Found me a shoe on the road
But it's just one shoe.
It won't get me to you.
Got the one-shoe, miss you, blues.

Charlie was so into it, he didn't hear the crunching of tires against the highway gravel. But when he looked up, there was a Volkswagen Beetle stopped in front of him.

It was a dingy white, with a rusted dent in the front fender and the chipped and faded remains of a flower decal on the door. It was the kind of car that would pick up a guy with Lennon glasses and shoulder-length hair turning gray at the roots.

The passenger's side door was closed, but the window was down. It framed a face almost too good to be true.

She had the kind of smile that made you want to do something to get her to smile again right away. The blonde hair was silky, and set off by a rainbow-colored headband with comets and unicorns. There was a tilt to the lady's head that promised a sense of motion and balance.

"Don't stop," she said, and Charlie didn't.

He coaxed the guitar. Old friend that it was, it came through for him most of the times that mattered.

Got one foot bare,
And the other don't care.
Got the one-shoe, miss you, blues.

"I like it," she said.

Charlie nodded.

"Need a ride? Or would you rather just sit and sing?"

"I'd be glad for a ride," Charlie said. "But right now, I think I'd be happy either way."

She laughed and swung open the car door. The hinge popped, the way Charlie might have guessed it would. He couldn't help noticing the long length of tanned legs, but he wasn't one to stare. He wedged the guitar and the backpack into the cramped rear seat.

She started the car with the distinctive, lawn mower sputter of an old Beetle, as Charlie got in. There was a cast-lead peace emblem dangling from the rearview mirror.

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Charlie touched the emblem. "Haven't seen one of those for awhile," he said.

"It still means what it always did, though. Right?"

"Yeah. Right," Charlie said, and settled back.

She coaxed the car into gear.

"Lyn," she said. "My name. I won't tell you what it's short for."

"I'm Charlie. Thanks for the ride."

"Hi, Charlie. Thanks for the company."

She drove with an arm out the window, fingers tapping on top of the car.

Charlie recognized the rhythm. It was "The One-Shoe Blues."

"Ever notice that?" he said.

"Notice what, Charlie."

"How many times you look alongside the road, and there's one shoe and never the pair."

"I guess you're right," she said, pointing as they drove past a boot that didn't match the first one.

"How do you suppose that happens?" Charlie said. More than anything, he just wanted to keep talking with her.

"I would guess . . . somebody was in the back seat of the car, sticking their feet out the window. I've done that. Haven't you, Charlie? And one of this person's shoes just happened to come off." She nodded prettily, as if having settled the question.

"But then, why didn't they go back and get it?"

"Well . . . ," she thought. "Because the person in the back seat was sleeping and didn't know what happened until it was too late."

Charlie warmed to the puzzlement. "OK, but even if a laced-up shoe, or a tight boot, could just happen to fall off, then why keep the other one?"

She laughed. "To remember the size."

Charlie said, "It still doesn't make sense."

"Maybe not, Charlie. Maybe not. Try this."

She brought out a baggie and a package of Zig-Zag papers from between the seats. Charlie was impressed at watching her roll a joint one-handed. She lit it with a plastic butane lighter on which the name "The Doors" was printed.

Charlie saw that, and at the same time, he thought he saw a burly-faced guy with a polka-dot cap in the next seat, lighting a Camel.

Charlie took another whiff of the sweet smoke that drifted toward him. He wasn't sure that he wanted a whole lot of it. He didn't do drugs anymore and didn't like to find crazy pictures floating through his head.

"One-legged people," Lyn said. She passed the joint to Charlie. "One-

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legged people drive around, throwing shoes they don't need out of car windows."

"I could go with that," Charlie said.

He faked a long drag, and what he got was still enough to make him feel like a balloon on a string.

"Colombian or what?" Charlie asked, passing it back to her.

She laughed, as if at a shared joke. "Or what," she said.

It was still her voice. But Charlie thought, for just a flash, her voice was coming from a jowly, bald-headed man, smoking a cigar. And the car seemed to widen. The seat stretched out, and creaked of leather and polish, like the insides of a Buick.

And then, it was gone.

Lyn was starting to behave more than a little on the giddy side, too. "Listen, Charlie. I've got it," she said. "Imagine this—it's pretty weird, but just imagine: Not one-legged people, but one-legged aliens, Charlie. Monsters, you might say."

"Pretty weird, all right."

"OK, now suppose they can look like anything. They can telepathically control people that way, just like on 'Star Trek . . .' "

"I didn't much like it after the second season," Charlie said.

". . . that would make it easy for them to catch people. Especially out in the open, like out in the desert, Charlie."

Charlie's head was starting to clear. "For what?" he said.

"Don't you get it? The monster, say, picks up a hitchhiker. They drive down the road awhile, having a good time, because the monster knows that people taste better when they're relaxed. It's kind of like marinating."

"The monster . . . eats the hitchhiker."

"Happily so," she said. "And the clothes come in handy afterwards, because, as you might guess, it is awkward for the monster to attempt shopping in K-Mart. The mind control begins to slip. Especially when the monster gets hungry."

Looking toward her, Charlie got the image of something with red, glistening eyes and gleaming teeth. And the car had a control panel that circled around them, full of dials and switches, and the light was a dull green.

And then, it was back to the Beetle.

"Let me see if I've got this right," Charlie said. "The monster eats the hitchhiker and keeps the hitchhiker's clothes. But, being as it is, a one-legged monster, it only needs one shoe."

"And throws out the left-over," she said. "What do you think, Charlie? Doesn't that explain everything?"

"I guess so," Charlie said.

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"Hey, what's the matter?" She touched the side of his face. "You're all sweaty, all of a sudden. And shaky, too, Charlie. Geez. It was only a story."

Smoothly, she relit the joint, and passed it toward him.

"I wish you would relax," she said.

He didn't want to relax. He didn't care to be marinated. He almost would have said so, but the words came out a choking sound. The smoke clung in motionless, flat layers around him, despite the hot wind that slapped at him though the side windows.

Charlie tried to fake a pull on the cigarette, but the smoke seemed to curl down his throat like a lizard.

"It doesn't make sense to me . . . ," Charlie said, and lost for a time what it was that didn't make sense, ". . . you know? 'Cause a one-legged monster, he couldn't need all that many shoes."

"How would you know what a monster might need, Charlie?"

She flicked the last of the cigarette out the window. The window slid shut with an electric hum . . . only it couldn't have, Charlie thought.

The window on Charlie's side worked with a bent crank, and the knob was missing.

He looked toward Lyn again. She was driving like before, tapping out the rhythm of the "One-Shoe Blues" on the car top.

At the same time, Charlie couldn't help noticing, she had both hands on the wheel.

He fingered the door latch.

"Suppose," she said, "suppose . . . there is no monster, Charlie. But suppose there is a . . . very different kind of life, from a different kind of place. Lost here, through no fault of its own. And it can change shapes, like on 'Star Trek.' Suppose . . . it could not make you understand how it does that, except to say that it *breathes in* the feelings all around it."

"Breathes in. Right," Charlie said.

"Out on the highway, it breathes in . . . loneliness. Emptiness, Charlie. It doesn't just feel lonely. It *becomes* loneliness. And it becomes emptiness. It becomes hunger."

Charlie tried the latch. It was locked, stuck tight.

"It becomes a hunger that is greater than itself, Charlie. And then, it becomes sorrow. It becomes a remorse that is the burning of hunger again. It knows that it cannot stop, but it can be made to stop. And so . . ."

She looked blankly ahead, toward the remains of a tennis shoe crumpled in the center of the road.

". . . it leaves, here and there, a small clue, Charlie. Something on the roadside. Something small, but wrong and strange and out of place.

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Something that might be noticed. A warning, Charlie. A pleading for help. A cry to be stopped."

She tapped on the car top. Charlie was relieved to see she was doing that with the window down. She laughed a little. "You really got me started, Charlie," she said.

"Same here," Charlie agreed. The beat of his heart raced past the uneven rhythm of the song.

"I like you, Charlie. I like your music."

"Thanks."

"Music can be . . . a kind of hunger."

"I know."

"It hurts. It hurts to hunger. But the pain could be worse. Do you know what I mean?"

Charlie just sat there, head clear, feeling stoned all the same.

"I want the guitar, Charlie."

He thought about that, until he could move again.

He wrestled the guitar out of the back. It felt slippery, because his hands were sweating, and his fingers jittered.

She smiled at him, that same way as before.

"Me, too," Charlie said. He threw the guitar out the window, and himself after it.

Something shrieked behind him, and she must have hit the brakes. The Beetle began to spin sideways. Blue smoke burned from the back tires.

And then, it wasn't a Beetle, but a thing of polished metal that caught the sun in a flashing, blurring reflection.

Charlie's eyes streamed tears, only in part from the light.

He was halfway out the window then, but something caught hold of his legs, and it wasn't the soft touch of a woman's hands. It was wet. And cold. And it tore at the denim of Charlie's jeans.

It tore at the skin.

He struggled, stuck at the waist, trying to kick loose.

The car jerked to a stop. Charlie felt himself pitched forward by the momentum. He was glad for the sudden taste of a mouthful of dirt.

But now, with a pop of the hinge, the car door opened.

Charlie hauled to his feet. He tried to run, but he couldn't. He was limping, stumbling, about to fall.

A look at his feet told him why.

He was missing the shoe on his right foot.

He couldn't run that way. He pulled off the left shoe, tossing it crazily toward the shapeless figure emerging from the car door.

Charlie's left shoe made a *clung!* sound against the side of the Beetle.

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"Oh, great, Charlie. Some thanks for the ride." She leaned out to examine the dent. Sunlight played brightly in the cascade of blonde hair.

"Know what I think of you, Charlie?" Lyn said. "You're weird, and you can't take a joke. And as for the mystery of cast-off shoes on the roadside, and how they got there . . ."

She pointed toward Charlie's shoe, there in the dust beside the car.

"I guess you solved that one. Huh, Charlie?"

The car door slammed. The motor gunned anxiously.

Charlie watched her peel away, although mostly what he saw was just the dust settling.

He wasn't up for trying to hitch another ride. And looking as he did, nobody was likely to stop for him anyway.

Charlie walked in shuffling steps. His jeans were torn off above the knees, the scrap material wrapped around his feet and tied with guitar strings. And still, the ground burned.

All in all, he couldn't remember feeling more like a fool, and it didn't help to be blasted off the road by the car horn that sounded behind him.

He turned just in time to catch a glimpse of the candy apple Corvette. There were bits of glitter in the paint finish. The girl driving it wasn't wearing any top at all that Charlie could see, and her hair was done up in a blonde swirly-cue like Dolly Parton.

The guy sitting next to her flashed the blank, dumb grin of having lucked out beyond all belief. There was a beat-up suitcase strapped to the back of the 'Vette.

The car sped past him, and was almost out of sight when Charlie saw the driver toss out something small and brown.

Charlie walked on, watching the ground, thinking about the wisp of a song he'd heard from the radio of the passing car.

He felt strangely pleased to think she had liked it so much.

Before long, he found the other shoe. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 93)

SECOND SOLUTION TO DIRAC'S SCISSORS

"That's not a question, but a statement," said Dirac. "Next question, please."

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February, the wolf month, is also the color of wolves. And through the pale browns and greys and whites of it, something so very red can be seen from a long way off.

In that fashion then, he saw her, coming down among the slopes of the damp and leafless woods. She passed by the old altar with its wrapper of ivy, the strips of hide hanging over it from the trees above. She crossed the stream by the old stones, carefully, so as not to get her little shoes wet. But the rain, which had earlier drenched the woods, beaded her long dark hair, and the fine palla she wore. The palla was so dense and rich a red, sight seemed to sink into it, it drowned and made vision drunk, as only natural colors were supposed to do. It was altogether of a hue that had no place in the wood, making everything else dim and unreal.

Having come over the stream, she could not avoid seeing him in turn as he emerged between the trees and stood there, looking at her. She was not apparently startled by him, though he was an interesting apparition, clothed, in the wintry day, only in hairy skins that were belted by a twisted briar. His own hair was long and shaggy, but his face clean-shaven and beautifully chiseled, as was his body. He too was the February color, silver-brown, his skin, his hair, and his eyes like brown water with a silver rim.

"Where are you going?" he said to her. "And why did you dye your cloak with blood?"

"Not blood," she answered haughtily. "Scarlet that the ships bring from the East."

"I serve the god in the woods," he said.

"I know you do," said she.

"You must submit."

"No," she said.

"Then you offend the god."

"I care nothing for your god. I have my own. I am a Christian," said the girl in the red palla.

"Yes, I have heard of him," said the young man who served Lycaean Pan. He spoke indifferently. The priests had marked him, he had a wolf soul that had shown itself during the ritual, grinning like a wolf with strong white teeth. He roamed through the woods, sacred to Faunus Lupercal, sleeping in dead trees, bathing in dew, shaving with slate, eating beetles, and hares with the life-hotness still in their meat, drinking from the fountains of the rocks, dancing under the full moon with wild hoarse howls and shrieks. It had always been this way, his kind in this place. And if she did not know it, the girl, she was a fool. And if she did know, why else was she here save to tempt her fate?

"Come now," he said, "submit. Or I can pull you down and have you anyway."

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She neither ran nor trembled; she went no nearer to him.

So then he came up to her.

"What does the needle do with the pin?" he said. "The pin has a round knob and a piercing shaft. The needle has an eye. One goes through the other. Thread the needle with the pin."

"Very well," said the girl, "but you will be sorry."

Then she opened her scarlet mantle. She was naked under it. She lay down on the ground on her hair and the red stuff, and he lay down on top of her. No sooner had he possessed her—with difficulty, for she was a virgin, and hurt him—than something terrible occurred. The folds of the palla began to move and stretch and reach out, and before he knew what was happening, they had folded up over him and covered him and buried him, like the petals of some huge poppy.

The sensation was at first not unpleasant, then it became horrible and fearful. The great palla settled down on him and all his energy was drawn away into it, as into the body of the girl. They were together a blood-red plant that consumed him. . . .

Later, much later, when the sun was going down through the woods, only a patch of rusty moisture showed on the earth, and by moonrise, this too was gone.

"The lupin is the wolf flower. Why?"

"Because it's hairy. And once there were blue wolves. They were born in nests high in the trees."

"Men," said my grandmother, "and wolves, were all one race, in the beginning. Then there had to be changes. There began to be a tribe that had only the heads of wolves, and the bodies of men, though they were shaggy-haired all over. But all wolves have human eyes. That's the difficulty. Men see it and they say, These are men disguised as animals. Men have always been afraid of their own kind, but daren't admit it. Then they see the eyes of wolves and it gives them an excuse. That is why men hate wolves."

"I think wolves are handsome," said my young cousin, George. "I wouldn't mind being a wolf. Could I be?"

"Very likely," said my grandmother, spending her double meaning only on me.

"But you didn't finish the story," I said. "What happened to the wolf-boy? And the girl in the red cloak?"

My grandmother shrugged. "Where's your imagination gone? That was in the days when the beast gods were respected, although the Christians were driving the old ways out. That girl wasn't a girl, but a demon conjured up by some priest. The boy thought he had the protection of his own god, Wolfish Pan. But Pan was already dead. The Christians killed

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him. And that's another story. Now, off home, before it starts to get dark."

My smaller cousin, Bettany, began to cry. She said there would be wolves in the wood, and they would devour her.

George, a cruel, pretty child, sly, looking under his lashes, declared it was the demon girl who would cause us trouble.

Grandmother said there were no such things any more as demons, and that otherwise, there had been no wolf seen in our countryside for fifty years. Besides, wolves ran away if you shouted at them. She had done this as a girl.

I held Bettany's hand, though it was wet from her snifflings. But George skipped ahead of us, slashing viciously at various bushes. The shadows were lengthening, but the wood was still bisected with broad avenues of light. It was April weather, not February, birds sang and waking squirrels sprang over the budding branches. We crossed the stream by the bridge, and I looked for an altar the other side but of course there was nothing left of it. It was easy to fancy, for all that, a slim brown shape now here, now there, between the tangle of trunks and sprays of wild vine.

Beyond the wood, the lane ran on across the fallow fields, by the deserted park and the dilapidated houses of rich people long since dead and forgotten, and so uphill to the outskirts of our town.

During the night, I dreamed that a wolf had given birth to me, high up in a tall tree of colossal boughs. By moonlight, the wolf was a soft milky blue, with wonderful sad eyes.

It was a melancholy, almost a mystical, dream.

Near morning, something very dreadful happened. I was roused by an awful crying note, over and over, so repetitious I thought it was something mechanical. The whole house seemed in uproar. Then, through the window, I saw one of the men rush out, and presently return with the doctor. George was very sick, my aunt told me, and put weeping Bettany, whom I was irritatedly powerless to comfort, with me into my room. Endless comings and goings next, we excluded from them, and finally silence.

A week later, I, with the rest, was dressed in black and taken to a grave-side along the hill. Little George had died of an unpronounceable illness that years subsequently I discovered to be meningitis.

In the following months, the family cracked like a trampled eggshell. Soon I was sent away to school. Other things, events, and my maturity, drove me further and further off to exile, to the cities and the south.

I did not visit the town for many years, by which time not one of my kindred remained there, and my rather improper, story-telling grand-

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mother had herself died. The ancient wood had been felled for the timber mills, and the encroaching roads and buildings of the town rolled over it.

"You've come back at a bad time," said the old man, who thought he remembered me, but in fact only remembered the little girl I had been. "Something going on now, not nice."

"What is that?"

But he would not tell a little girl. Later on, over midnight glasses of hot chocolate at the hotel, a sinister gossiping began between staff, regular guests, and the itinerants, among whom now I was numbered.

"There's been another."

"So there has."

"Oh where?"

"The same area as last time. But worse, much worse, this one."

"Is it true that they—?"

"Oh, yes, quite true." Then, seeing me lean closer: "The throats are torn out and the bodies mauled. Dogs, you might say, or something escaped. But there's the other thing—they wouldn't do it. It's not an animal. Or if it is, then that's not all it is."

Although there are streets now, and hard concrete, over the wooded tracks, and the stream runs in a canal with seats on the banks and refuse in the water, and the tree have gone to copses on neat lawns, even so, the town keeps its dreams and nightmares of legends. They know what they think this is. Only the alien traveller would scoff.

"A month to the day they moved the cemetery. Lifting the stones. . . . Everything was done properly, the priests saw to it. But there. The old Vaudron family, they were here from heaven knows when. The old lady, you knew her? Some of her tales, now, the children used to shake with fear for weeks—"

"And him only seven years of age, and dead in a night, calling out in pain. Awful cries, like something lost, or a whistle—"

The Vaudron family was my uncle's; they were talking about my little cousin, George.

"Well," said the receptionist, the doors being closed, coming to drink her own chocolate beside me. "There's a police patrol now every night, and a lot of good it does. Last month, they saw someone, a man, very late, along by the canal. They're not sure, he may be innocent, but they've found a dead woman—and there's something about him. They follow. Then he passes under a street lamp. Now there's a girl, looking out of her window, waiting for somebody, maybe. He goes by, across the street, under the lamp—and she starts screaming. He vanishes down an alley. The police run after him, can't find him. Some of them go up the stairs

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and hammer on the door of the girl's room. Was it a signal? It seems not. That girl, all she can say is, A man, but he had the *face of a wolf.* And they have to take her to the sanatorium, where she is to this minute. She lies there and screams that she saw a man with a wolf's head and a wolf's face."

"Do you believe she saw that, really, Madame?" I said.

The receptionist shrugged. "Why not? Is it so strange? In my grandmother's day it wouldn't have surprised a soul. Now we have television, which would have upset her no end."

I thought about my own grandmother, just young enough to have seen such witchcraft as television in. She was still renowned, it would seem, for her stories. I thought about little Cousin George, dying of meningitis. I couldn't accept that if any essence of us persists after death, it could degenerate into something so arcanely banal as a murdering ghost or werewolf. But on the other hand, perhaps some sort of subsidiary impression had been left over from the physical energy of the male child who liked wolves. Like a paw-print in wet cement.

A couple of nights later, I happened to run out of cigarettes, and so I walked down to the neon café and bought a packet, and drank a *fine.* Then, not wanting to go back to read or sleep, I began to stroll along by the canal. It was just after midnight, but the moon was high, completely round and slicked with white, so the street lights were nearly superfluous. A clear-edged bluish glow lay everywhere, and the shadows were only transparently black. Stars stung the sky. There was nobody about, not here, away from the cafés of the main street. It had occurred to me that, in the era of my childhood, this must have been the route to my grandmother's house in the wood: This the stream, though the old bridge was gone and I had already crossed over by the new one, and trees invisibly all round, in the blue light. Plowed under now, everything, house and all, along with the rich people's villas, and the concrete poured over, paw-marked or otherwise.

I smoked a cigarette, and when I finished, tossed the butt into the moon-lit water. Then, turning, I saw a man under one of the lamps, leaning there, watching me.

I walked over to him. Perhaps he was looking for company, but the prostitutes who might occasionally have touted here no longer did so. Then, without shock, I recognised him. It was not from the past, but the story.

Of course, I had never believed my little cousins would grow up, either of them, any more than I thought I would myself. This may be the reason why children are often not offended by the death of their peers. Five years older than he, I had found him easy to leave behind. Yet, there

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was a family resemblance; mostly he looked like the wolf-boy in the legend. Handsome and curious, those ash and amber colours, veiled by moonlight, and the pale, beautiful lupine eyes. It was a human head, if less human than anything I had ever seen before, less human than the face of an animal. Nor was he dressed in skins, but as one would expect of a poor young man, perhaps a student. Was he nineteen years old? Probably. I was twenty-four, that would be right.

I went up to him, and I said, "Good-evening, George."

He smiled, gorgeously. The hot eyes did not join in, but all the rest of the face, the body muscles, seemed to do so.

"You know me?"

"We're related, shall I say?"

"Is that," he asked, "why you're wearing red?"

It had happened, as it happened I had run out of cigarettes, that the coat I had brought with me was of the reddest, most scarlet wool, a coat of blood.

"Whatever do you mean?" I said.

"Remind me of your name, since you know mine," he said.

I told him, adding that until I was twelve, we had lived in the same house, with my uncle, his father. He looked uninterested rather than dismayed. He said, "Ah, that. But that's past. Well, will you come and have a drink with me?"

I said I would.

Naturally he did not, taking me lightly by the arm, walk me back towards the bright busy cafés, but away along the canal, and down a side-street. Soon we had reached some closed shops and then a rough empty lot with a ruined, boarded house, and many trees. He led me to the house, through the thickets, which were full of fallen stones. I had no notion who it belonged to, it had been built, and abandoned, after I left the town. Several had bivouacked there since. We crept through some loose boards into a cold, moon-stripped salon. A fire was ready-laid from branches, cones, newspapers, in the grate, regardless of the state of the chimney. This fire he immediately lit with matches. From under some bricks he took two bottles of wine, a cheese wrapped in oil-cloth, and a bag of apples. We feasted solemnly. We had done so as children.

"Didn't the police come here?"

"It goes without saying," he said.

"But you were away, and had left no trace."

He grinned at me slowly.

"And the smoke. Doesn't anyone see?"

He said: "There's always that." He seemed to think he was protected, and conceivably he was.

"Tell me," I said at last.

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"Why should I?"

"I thought you might like to."

"Confession?"

"Or boast. Who else would listen?"

"Plenty of people would listen."

"Do you remember any childhood?" I asked him.

He looked at me a long while, as if gauging the limits of my understanding. Then he shook his head. His hair was a shaggy flamy thing in the firelight. His brown-silver eyes shone, when they were in the dark out of the fire, hard and flat and green. Human eyes do not do this. Wolf eyes, however human, do.

"Then, when did it begin? When they dug up the grave?"

"Yes." He moved closer—we were both seated on the floor. He touched my face gently, with his long-fingered, long-nailed hand. "After all," he said, "you remember your childhood, but you don't feel, do you, it was truthfully you? *That* was someone else."

"Yes, that's so."

"Well. I know he was a child. Another person. I simply recognise that it wasn't myself at all. I'm George here and now. I'm here, I'm now."

"And the grave—"

"Like lifting the lid of a kettle. The lid, down, gives the illusion of suppression. But I was there, underneath."

He said there was a darkness and he came out of the darkness in the way one comes out of sleep. There might have been dreams, or not. He asked, had I ever woken up and for a while not known where I was, or the day or date even, not minding it, knowing I would recall, but not yet recalling. I had, and said I had. Well, he said, it was like that for him. Then, he found himself walking through the town. It was quite unfamiliar, yet—like days and dates—he realized it would *become* recollected, he had only to wait. And then he saw a girl, by the canal. Probably she was soliciting. He went up to her and asked her for a cigarette. (George had seen his father and brothers smoke. It would be normal for him to assume that he, when an adult, would smoke also.) The girl gave him the cigarette. (He asked me if I knew the prostitutes in Roman times had been called 'she-wolf'—not as an insult, but to indicate their honorable usefulness, linked to the motif of the wolf-mother of the city, and the werewolf festival of Lupercalia.) Then she suggested he might like to go with her, to a café, but instead he took her into an alley he had already found, and there he killed her. It seemed perfectly natural to him, he was excited but competent, knowing instinctively, as with sex, what should be done. In fact, it was like sex, and afterwards he was worried he had not possessed her before killing her. He did not abuse the corpse. The ethics of the bourgeois Vaudron family intervened. He

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found another girl to satisfy concupiscence, and then arranged to meet her again the next night. When he met this second girl this second time, he first made love to her and then tore her to pieces. He killed her in the middle of orgasm, both hers and his own. This was highly fulfilling, it seemed, and became thereafter his modus operandi. Sometimes he fed at these times. He also ate other food. The cafés and hotels threw things out, or gave them to him, or he stole them.

It came to me that the town had remained a wood for him, and in a way I wondered if he even saw the buildings and the roads as such, or if they were somehow caves and trees, and savage woodland glades. By this formula, too, he might have his uncanny protection, making himself in turn invisible to the town, and to its police force. Seeing him quite frequently, as they must do, they had never seen *him*.

The fire sank. It was cold in the boarded house, February weather.

"Sometimes I go to a church," he said. "Once, I did make confession. But not the killings. You see, for me, the killing is not a sin."

"No, I understand that."

As he moved to put more cones and branches on to the fading fire, I told him the dream I had had, the night he—no, George—had died. About the blue wolf who gave birth to me in the great tree, and her sad eyes. I mentioned the idea to him that the mother-birth is the second birth, that the ejection of the seed—the paternal birth—precedes it. I wanted to inquire after the metamorphosis he himself underwent, perhaps during this ejection, or directly before. Presumably, it did happen. But how did he accomplish it? He seemed totally physically real, and if he was, such a displacement of atoms must be impossible.

"Well, maybe the wolves did birth you," he said. "You arrived at the house an orphan."

"I don't remember my parents," I said.

"I remember mine," he said. "*His*."

"Do you remember our grandmother?"

"A big mouth, always telling us things she shouldn't have. But you were a strange child. That's how I see you now. I wonder what happened to that other girl . . ."

"Bettany?" I paused. Bettany had married a banker, and become another woman who ate chocolates and produced children. I had not seen her for years. Neither of us now wanted to talk about Bettany. I think it was only some associative memory stirring in George's brief past, like a nerve. Eventually, I pushed her right away, and said, "And you remember the story our grandmother told us?"

"The girl with the mantle made of blood," he said. "Like you."

"Do you worship the old gods? Do you make sacrifices to Pan?"

He laughed. The laugh was wonderful. He sat back on his heels, laugh-

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ing, warm February fire all over him. He ate life. It had filled him. He was unlike anything, human or beast.

"No. Pan? Pan is dead. Or is that a pun—*Pan—du pain*— bread —*peine*—pain—the body of Christ?"

"I meant, how do you effect the transformation?"

He lowered his eyes—with a dagger-green flash—like a modest girl who has been asked by a man if he may touch, very politely, her breast.

"What is that?" he said.

"Man into wolf. Is it possible?"

"Of course."

"How?"

"Do you want me to show you?" he said, looking at me now in the old sly way, under his lashes.

"No," I said. But I did want him to. "Could you not simply describe for me—"

"If I do it," he said, "you may be frightened. You may go mad. Or, I may kill you."

"You would stop being yourself."

"I should become myself."

"There's no self to become," I said. "Whatever you are, not really. So, I suppose you could become anything. Is that what the answer is?"

"I remember the girl in the story," he said. "She wouldn't submit."

"Then she did."

"Yes. Then she did. Do you actually think," he said, "that any one of us is truly what we're pleased to call 'real'? All matter, flesh, skin, trees, stone, bricks, blood—it's all illusory, fluid, non-existent, formed from nothing—therefore capable of any alteration, and of complete change. Wouldn't you say? Where else do the woods go to, when they turn into concrete? How else? And the bread that's a body, and children who grow up or turn into a heap of calcium in the ground?"

"What about the needle and the pin?"

"There's no choice between them. They're the same. They both pierce and they both join together."

"Is that what it meant?"

"In the story she told us."

"Show me, then," I said.

"Look at me, then," he said.

So I did look. I looked hard, too hard. And then I let myself relax, even my eyes, I allowed them to unfocus a little, just a very little, and gradually, by the broad gusts of fire through the shadow, I began to see the wolf. There was no violence, no tearing or twisting, no flare up of pelt, the skull re-shaping itself, a howling frenzy. Frankly, it was all already there. By allowing myself to see, I merely saw it. Then again, the terror

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of it, for it was quite terrifying, was all because it was *not* a wolf at all, but some intrinsic fear-thing that was to do with man's phobia at wolves, primeval, matted, dark, fathomless. It was the head of a creature that was the head of fear, and with a man's body, a man's long wolfish hands, with which to work the horror out.

Presently I looked away, and opened my purse and took out a cigarette. When I had struck the match and lit it, I offered the packet to him, and he had become a young man again, a wolf-boy, much more wolf-like in his human form. The werewolf was only the image, the *icon* of the nightmare.

We smoked our cigarettes in silence, and then he lay down, his head in my lap. The fire played on the planes of his face. I watched him, trying to memorize his beauty, as one does with some work of art one may never see again. After a while, he said that he often slept here, but he was cold tonight, did I feel the cold as he did? He thought not. His blood was hotter than mine. So then I took off my red coat and laid it over him, drawing it up to his chin.

He slept after an interval, and I, my back propped against the rotted boards, also slept a few moments. I dreamed I was in the tree again, in the act of birth from the belly or the penis of the lupin-blue wolf. I thought, That's the riddle then. Not to find the bestial in humankind, but this constant thrust to be free of it, the coming out from the beast, the ancestor in his sheath of hair and hunger. Then I woke, and he slept, still. I got up carefully, not to wake him; I did not want to make him start. But as I moved to the fire, I half believed I caught the flash of his eyes, watching on under their lashes. Yet who goes in the wood, knowing the wood, is there to tempt his fate. He recalled, he had told me so. I pulled one of the last twigs out of the grate, and carried the bud of February fire back to him. I even still waited an instant, letting the glare and heat of the burning twig flicker above his face, as Psyche did, when she stared down on her shape-changer monster-god in the legend of love. But now he did not open his eyes, if he ever had.

I put the flame to the edges of my coat, all the way around, then threw the last smoulder of the twig down into his hair.

At first, there was nothing, just a ripple, sparks, smoke. Then suddenly, all of it went up, the coat, the wolf-mane, and he too, a spasm of fire, scarlet on the shadow, the color of blood, redness covering him, obliterating him. He gave no cry, and scarcely changed position, only rolling a little, as if to be one with the warmth and comfort.

I found it very cold outside, after the fire. The house was burning by the time I reached the canal. I could see the light on the sky, and the smoke going over the sinking moon.

* * *

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My grandmother's grave, in the transported cemetery, has flowers growing on it, and ivy, but no lupins. I took photographs of that, and other Vaudron graves. That was really all modernization had left me. The dwellings and landmarks of my childhood were gone. There was some excitement in the town that day, about a derelict house which had caught on fire in the night. Tramps had been using it, and no one was astonished that the cooling clinker revealed the remains of a man. Then again, however, they were not sure it was a man, or anything, for that matter, ever alive. At the correct temperature, even bones will melt. You can rely on the constancy of nothing.

Having to buy a coat, I was disconcerted by the women in the shop. They were so interested in all the other aspects of their lives, that for them I hardly existed. I had become a sort of ghost. I left the town near evening, by the night train for the south. In the city I knew I would be recognized, and spoken to, I knew I should be perfectly alive and real. ●

GAMING

(continued from page 25)

bat altogether by jettisoning your cargo—that's all the pirates are interested in. No matter how painful such a decision is, it's better than certain destruction.

Even if you successfully fight off the pirates, your ship will most likely have taken damage in battle and you'll have to pay to repair that damage. There go the profits from your shrewd wheeling and dealing.

When you check your ship for damage, you move through the vessel as various storage bays and other compartments appear in windows on the screen. The excellent graphics give a good impression of actually checking out each of the ship's individual systems.

If a system is damaged, you can repair it if you have the correct part to do so in one of your storage bays. Some of the parts are interchangeable, so you can cannibalize one system to repair another. Of course, parts from one system don't work as efficiently in another system and this could result in the engine using fuel less efficiently.

A particularly useful interchangeable part is called a "shunt." Shunts work in a variety of systems (although not as well as the original part specifically designed for the job), and they provide a good "quick fix" to keep your ship running until you can get to a planet to buy new parts—assuming that planet has the parts you need. It's a good idea to buy spare parts whenever you can and keep them in your storage bays. And keep plenty of shunts on hand too. Sooner or later, you'll need them.

Sundog has excellent graphics, plays easily, and offers enough strategy options to give it good replay value. If you're looking for an entertaining and well-presented SF computer game, try *Sundog*. ●

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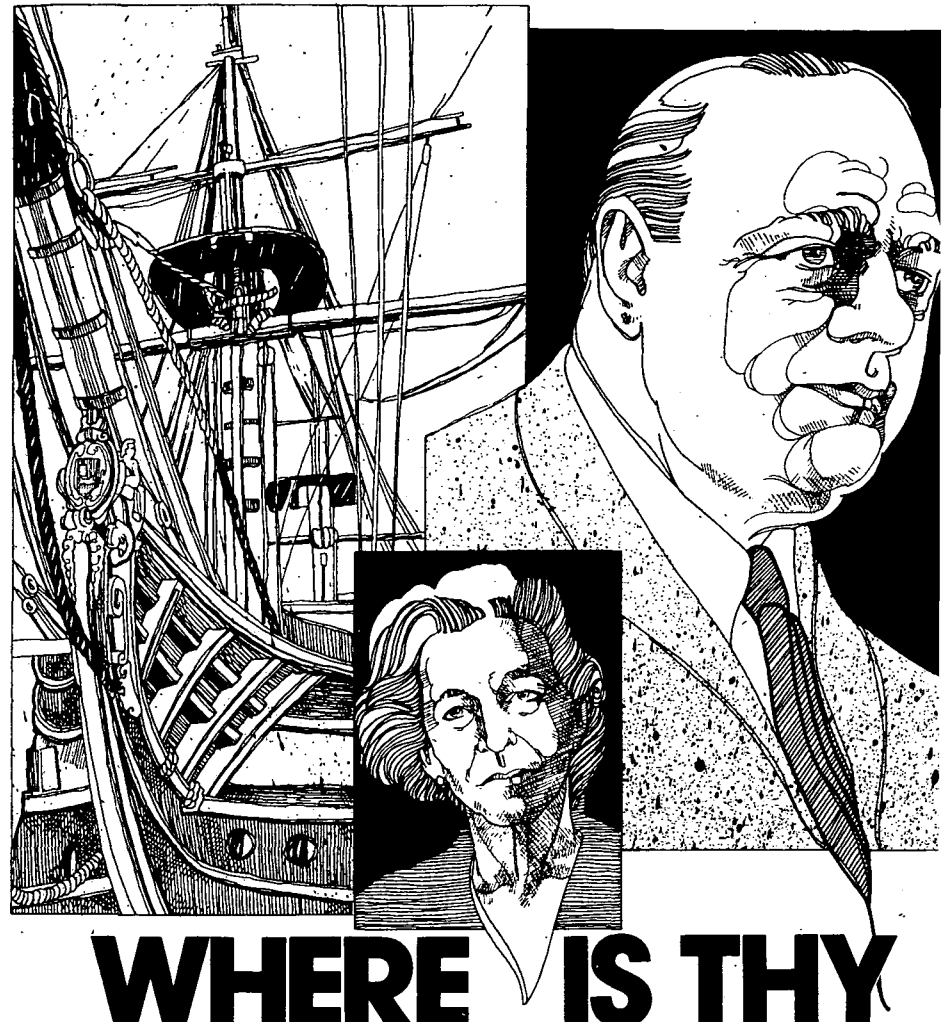

WHERE IS THY VICTORY?

by Lillian Stewart Carl

art: George Thompson

"Where Is Thy Victory?" marks Lillian Stewart Carl's third appearance in *IAsfm*. Her most recent story, "From the Labyrinth of Night," was published in our August 1984 issue. Ms. Carl just sold a sequel, tentatively titled *The Winter King*, to her novel, *Sabazel* (Ace Books), and she is currently working on several stories and another novel.

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Tom burst into the room, tossed down a pile of letters and advertisements, brandished a giant package. His face shone like a child's on Christmas morning. "Look what came! The *Victory*!"

Emily was buried to her wrists in potting soil. Really, this violet had always been sickly—perhaps if she put it on the back porch . . . "What?"

Tom produced his pen knife and slit the wrapping paper with a flourish. "The *Victory*. Nelson's flagship."

This leaf here, and this root—there. "They sent it all the way from Southampton?" she inquired, distracted.

"Portsmouth. It's in Portsmouth. We spent our twentieth anniversary there, remember?"

"Trying to keep Brian off the mainmast," Emily responded with a laugh. She brushed off her hands and turned. "Oh—the new model!"

A definitive rip of paper, and Tom held an oblong box illustrated with a garish battle at sea—cannon smoke, shattered masts, bodies flailing in crimson-flecked water. "Trafalgar," he sighed. "Nelson dying in glory."

"If he'd kept his head down," said Emily, "he wouldn't have died."

Tom didn't hear her. Slowly, savoring the moment, he opened the box. A mound of smaller boxes, thin slabs of balsa wood, sticks and vials of glue and paint. He regarded it all, his face sobering, and announced, "I was a fool to order one this complicated. This big. I'll never finish it."

"You said that about the other ones." Emily glanced at the living room mantel and the neat flotilla arranged thereon. "You've been wanting this to be the flagship of your fleet."

"Well, yes. . . ."

She smiled; he was a child, wanting reassurance. Little enough to give.

Tom found the instructions, a thick booklet, pages of close-set type. "I'll be damned," he exclaimed. "It's in Italian."

Oh no. Her heart sank for him. "You'll have to send it back."

But his chin was set, his eyes gleaming. "No. I'll figure it out. It has pictures, and I've done the other ones. . . ." Still muttering, he carried the box into the little room off the kitchen that was his shop.

Emily leaned on the sink, watching Brian and his basketball in the driveway—God, he was growing tall and lanky, have to raise the goal—but no, he was off to college in the fall. . . . She listened to the ordered thumps of the ball against the concrete, and the click and jingle of the tools in the workroom.

"Now," she said quietly to herself, "now. Stop time, now . . ."

Brian stood in the door of the workroom, his hands plunged deep into his pockets as if to reassure his father he wouldn't try to touch anything. "The job market being what it is, I thought I should switch majors this spring. Then when I graduate next year . . ."

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Emily looked from Brian to Tom. Tom bent over the model ship. His glasses rode down his nose and he shoved them back up. Delicately, delicately, his long fingers fitted the main deck into the hull.

Emily looked from Tom back to Brian, exchanging a knowing nod.

Brian skirted the row of cleaned and polished golf shoes, hibernating for the winter, to squint closely at the ship. "You mean you put in all the other decks, too?"

"Right down to the bilge." Tom reached for a paintbrush and flicked away a microscopic bit of sawdust.

"But nobody will ever see them. They're covered up."

Tom adjusted his glasses again and fixed his son with keen hazel eyes. "I know they're there."

Emily smiled. Just like him. So like him. . . . The curve of the hull gleamed, sanded and varnished to a velvet smoothness. Each miniature gunport was secured with its own hinges, its own catch—three decks of imaginary cannons, silent, at peace. . . . Her eye strayed to the box. It was looking somewhat battered now, but still the illustration seethed with explosions and screams.

"Wow," Brian said. "You'll never finish that thing."

Tom dabbed glue on a toothpick. "Oh, yes I will."

"Give him time," said Emily. "Just give him time."

Tom had come in from the retirement party and gone straight to the *Victory*. Now, as Emily peered around the door of the workroom, he picked up an inch-long strip of copper plating, balanced it in his tweezers, applied it to the upturned hull.

"Well," he explained in response to her presence, "the real ship has copper plating. Barnacles, you know."

"It'll be a family heirloom," said Emily. "All the little extras you've put into it . . ."

"It has to be right."

And now you have long winter days to work on it, she thought. Good. Every winter, stretching on into infinity, the scent of varnish permeating the house just as the summers are scented with grass, freshly-cut by the lawnmower, tracked into the house on our golf shoes . . . The *Victory* riding the crest of our future.

Painstakingly, another copper strip. His face intent, his hand steady.

She asked, "Anything special you want to do when Brian and Sally come next week?"

"We can go down to the hobby shop—they didn't include enough with this kit. . . ." He turned and picked up a catalogue that lay open on a bench nearby. "Look. Wonder if we could get Joe at the shop to order one of these?"

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A tiny ivory statue of Lord Nelson. Hideously expensive. "You're obsessed," Emily told him, but she laughed as she spoke.

"It has to be right," he repeated. "Someday it will be." And that explained everything.

Emily and Sally sat together folding the baby's tiny garments, giggling and chatting companionably. The baby itself was engaged in a search-and-destroy mission, sampling the contents of the flowerpots, leaving sticky fingerprints on the windows.

How indulgent I am, Emily thought. My grandchild can get away with anything. . . .

The toddler disappeared into the kitchen. "Whoops," Sally said, jumping to her feet. "Out of sight is definitely not out of mind."

A shout, and a heartbroken wail. Brian appeared in the door clutching a wiggling, screaming bundle of child. "What happened?" demanded Sally.

"She was about three inches away from Dad's ship. Little hands outstretched, ready to devastate the yardarms."

"We'll have to call her Napoleon," suggested Emily. "Here, let me." She took the shrieking child and tried to distract her with a rubber duck abandoned under a couch pillow.

Tom's creased face glared around the corner. "Better watch her—one good swipe and . . ."

"Keep the door closed," Emily admonished. "It's only a ship."

Tom jerked as if she'd slapped him. He turned and stalked back into the workroom. The door slammed with sepulchral finality.

"Uh-oh," Brian said.

Emily bent her cheek against the warmth of the child's hair. Lord, why did I say that—his grandchild, yes, and his mortality. . . .

She put the baby down, straightened her back, tapped gently on the workroom door. "Hunh!" Tom demanded.

Emily looked in. "I'm sorry."

"Hm," he returned. Agreeing to be mollified. He placed a tiny pulley in a clamp and painstakingly threaded it.

Really, such a child himself . . . Emily's breath caught in her throat. When had his hair turned white? she wondered. When had those lines set themselves so deeply into his cheeks? His mouth was a thin line, determination and pain.

Suddenly she was frightened.

Tom sat propped up in the chair, a blanket thrown over his knees. A catalogue lay, opened and forgotten, in his lap. His face was turned to

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the window, watching the fall leaves swirl in aimless gusts against the panes.

"What did you find?" Emily asked. She picked up the catalogue. "Ah, yes. . . ." The little ivory Nelson he'd been wanting. She was going to get it for him when the ship was finished. If . . .

She tightened her lips. No. Mustn't think that way. She placed an envelope on the table next to Tom's hand. Thin, blue-veined hand, trembling slightly.

He started and pulled his gaze back into the room. "New snapshots of the kids?" he asked.

"Yes. Brian got them in their Halloween costumes. Smurfette and Princess Leia."

"Ah." He looked at the pictures. His poor, wasted face softened, the deep lines smoothing. His cheekbones, Emily thought. His gaunt cheekbones, like the prows of ships shattering themselves against the merciless reefs of time.

He laid the pictures down, as if the effort of holding them tired him. He caught Emily's eye and attempted a smile. "Don't worry. I'll be up and about in no time. Back out there splashing paint on my good clothes. . . ." He gestured feebly at the instruction books for the model ship, words underlined and defined in the margins, drawings enlarged. Laid like offerings at his feet.

"Yes," said Emily. "Certainly."

His smile withered. "Emily," he started, but he couldn't finish.

Yes, she thought, yes, I'm scared too. Her hand fell gently on his shoulder.

The funeral was on a bright, brisk November day. Crimson maple leaves drifted into the open grave. The raucous voices and music of a college football game echoed faintly down the wind.

Flowers filled the hallway, strange dishes the refrigerator. The tide of friends and relatives flowed and ebbed again, and Emily was left alone at her kitchen table surrounded by a jetsam of sympathy cards.

Brian's kiss lingered on her cheek. "If you need us, just call. Anytime."

But how could they give her what she needed. . . . Unwillingly her eye turned to the closed door of the workroom. She knew what was inside, knew it as well as the shape of the grave—a small room, dusty and musty with disuse, and the mound of the unfinished ship draped with a cloth like a shroud. A hulk, beached and empty. "Tom," she whispered, "I'm so sorry. . . ."

If only he'd worked on it during the summers too, if only he'd spent longer hours—but no, it would have been a chore then, not pleasure. If

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only he'd gone to see the doctor when first he began to hurt. . . . If, if, if.

A tear fell on the paper she held and she blotted it with her fingertip. An ache, dull and heavy in her heart. Death, where is thy sting. . .

January. The Christmas festivities dispatched at Brian's house this year. The will properly probated, the state given its due. The house, cold and empty, Tom's ships arranged on the mantelpiece, Tom's picture smiling down on them from the wall. The space for the *Victory* left empty.

His pictured smile tight with sadness, with regret.

Emily rinsed her teacup in the sink and stopped, tilting her head, listening. Funny noise, must be the water heater. . . .

The rasp of sandpaper. The chink of tools. Coming from the workroom.

She stood transfixed, every nerve shooting its own arc of energy through her body. Not fear—the fear had already run its course and been exorcised—exhilaration, perhaps.

She walked to the door, placed her hand on the knob, turned it.

Silence. A lingering odor of varnish and sawdust. The tools laid in tidy rows along the table and the dust cover folded neatly on a shelf. The *Victory* thrusting its masts upwards, trailing threads of rigging like the tendrils of a growing plant.

Emily shut the door. She leaned her cheek against the wood. From inside, again, the faintest rustle, the faintest impression of movement. Delicate flickers of memory.

She turned, tears stinging her eyes. Hope, and a prayer. "Tom . . ."

It seemed to Emily as if the tulips had appeared in the wink of an eye, one moment bare ground, the next brilliant reds and yellows.

She cleaned her shoes on the mat and stepped inside. She went to the workroom door and once again, for the hundredth, for the thousandth time, leaned against it. An odor of wax. The rustle of thread.

She smiled. She opened the door a crack and slid the package she held inside. "Joe's Hobby Shop" the paper read. A can of varnish, since the first was almost empty. Another spool of thread for the rigging. Tiny railroad ties to use as belaying pins.

"It's all I can do," she whispered. "Is it enough?"

Emily closed the door again and turned away. Tonight, the musical with the neighbors; tomorrow, shopping with a friend . . . "Is it enough?" she asked again.

The faint sounds of movement, of lingering life, echoed through the door.

Emily swished the suds down the drain and glanced out the window.

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Brian teasingly held the basketball over his older daughter's head. "Daddy, Daddy! Let me have it, Daddy!"

The younger girl maneuvered in a guerrilla attack on his legs. There! Pounce, and the ball bounced free.

The bounce of the ball on the driveway, but no plinking from the workroom. None at all, nor had there been for a week or so.

Sally folded her dishcloth. "I'd better go rescue those baskets of Easter eggs. Thanks for going to the trouble of hiding them."

"No trouble." How Tom would have laughed at the girls, trailing from flower bed to flower bed, spilling as many eggs from their baskets as they picked up. . . . Appropriate, that today was Easter.

"What a shame," Sally said as she walked by the workroom, "that Dad never finished that ship." She went out the back door.

Emily sighed. How can I explain it? she thought. The presence in the workroom, the supplies used up—perhaps she had imagined it, perhaps her regret had driven her crazy. Perhaps it simply wasn't true.

But Tom had never doubted. And now—a grace note on his life. A tiny eddy in time, like that caused by a passing ship. . . .

She took the towel and went into the living room, dusted the empty place on the mantle.

Brian and the girls catapulted inside, laughing and demanding food. Sally struggled in their wake, laden with bright Easter decorations. "We just ate," she protested feebly.

Emily opened a cabinet and took out a cardboard box. What else to do with the insurance money? A parting gift.

"I want to show you something," she called, and her family fell in behind her, an uneven parade to the door of the workroom.

She paused. If she were wrong, if she were crazy—then, then, death would sting indeed. But no, he had never doubted. She would never doubt. She closed her eyes and opened the door.

Brian gasped. One of the girls clapped her hands. "Grandma, how pretty!"

Slowly Emily opened her eyes. The room was still and empty, the illustrated box crumpled, indecipherable. But the *Victory* stood finished on the table. The hull gleamed; the masts reached heavenwards, the yardarms draped an intricate lace of rigging over the deck. The hatches lay open, offering a glimpse of decks and ladders like layered memories. The figurehead gazed calmly into the distance, following the straight line of the bowsprit into the future, at rest.

At peace. Emily smiled. "Brian, please . . ." In numbed silence he lifted the model and carried it to its place on the mantle.

"I didn't know you were working on it," Sally said. "It's lovely."

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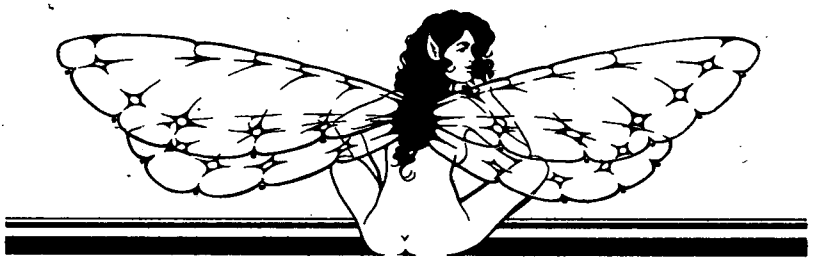
"Wow," said Brian. The girls circled, making little leaps upwards like dolphins riding the bow wave of the *Victory* itself.

Emily still smiled. I know the truth, she thought. Let it end with me. My own reassurance, at last. She stepped forward and opened the box. Inside, lying on a soft bed of cotton, was the ivory statue of Nelson. Her hand was quite steady as she lifted it and set it beside the ship. "There," she said.

They stood in a semi-circle, watching, waiting for something to happen. But it already had.

"Oh death, where is thy sting?" Emily whispered. "Oh grave, where is thy . . ."

Her voice broke. She turned away, and Brian's arms enfolded her. But the tears were tears of celebration. ●



NEXT ISSUE

Two 1984 finalists for the John W. Campbell award will grace the pages of the December *IAsfm.* Our cover story, "Empire Dreams," is by the powerful new writer and Campbell award nominee, Ian McDonald. Mr. McDonald first burst upon the field of SF in the January 1984 issue of *IAsfm,* with his short story "The Catharine Wheel." Our other nominee, Lucius Shepard, is also a finalist in two Hugo award categories: Best Novelette and Best Short Story. Multiple award winner Gene Wolfe will be appearing in *IAsfm* for the first time in several years with his story, "The Nebraskan and the Nereid." We will also have a Viewpoint on artificial intelligence by Marvin Minsky, and stories by Robert F. Young, Sydney J. Van Scyoc, and others. Pick up this issue September 24, 1985.

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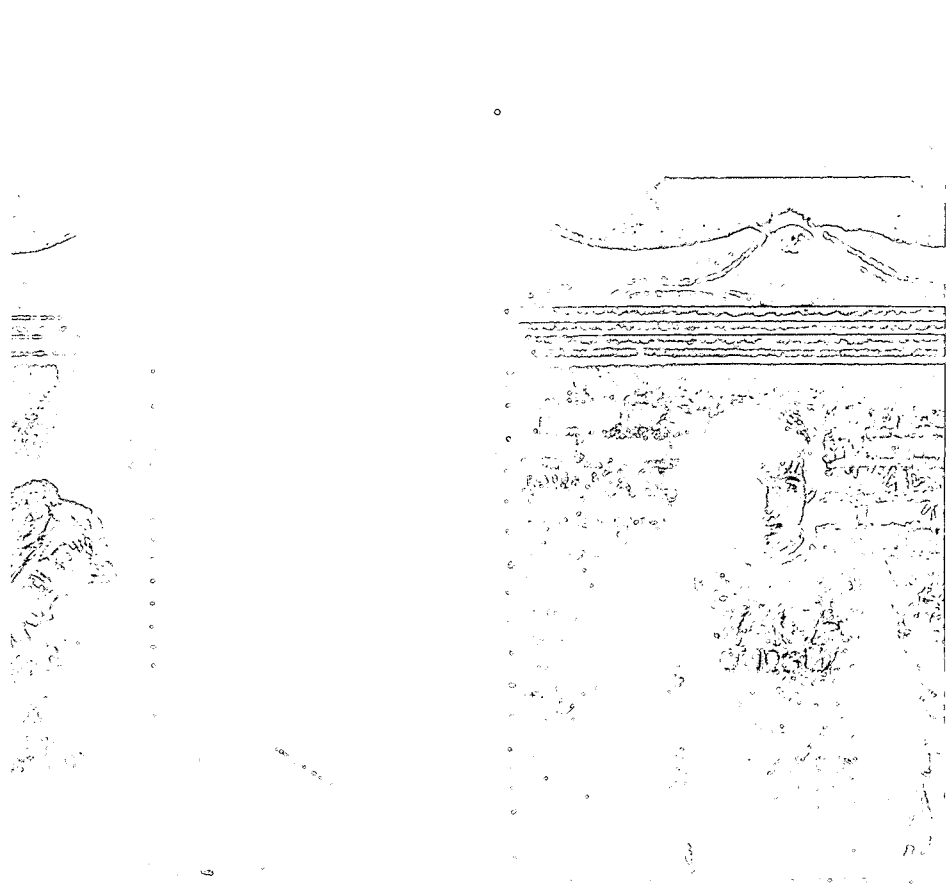

by George R. R. Martin

PORTRAITS OF HIS CHILDREN

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art: Stephen Gervais

We are pleased to be showcasing this powerful story by the winner of three Hugos and a Nebula. Although this story contains brief scenes and language which may be disturbing to some, we wouldn't be surprised if "Portraits of His Children" puts the author in the running for another of these coveted awards. Mr. Martin lives in a fake adobe abode in Sante Fe, New Mexico. His most recent books include *Nightflyers* (Bluejay, October 1985) and *Tuf Voyaging*, (scheduled to be released from Baen Books in January of 1986).

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Richard Cantling found the package leaning up against his front door, one evening in late October when he was setting out for his walk. It annoyed him. He had told his postman repeatedly to ring the bell when delivering anything too big to fit through the mail slot, yet the man persisted in abandoning the packages on the porch, where any passerby could simply walk off with them. Although, to be fair, Cantling's house was rather isolated, sitting on the river bluffs at the end of a cul de sac, and the trees effectively screened it off from the street. Still, there was always the possibility of damage from rain or wind or snow.

Cantling's displeasure lasted only an instant. Wrapped in heavy brown paper and carefully sealed with tape, the package had a shape that told all. Obviously a painting. And the hand that had block-printed his address in heavy green marker was unmistakably Michelle's. Another self-portrait then. She must be feeling repentant.

He was more surprised than he cared to admit, even to himself. He had always been a stubborn man. He could hold grudges for years, even decades, and he had the greatest difficulty admitting any wrong. And Michelle, being his only child, seemed to take after him in all of that. He hadn't expected this kind of gesture from her. It was . . . well, sweet.

He set aside his walking stick to lug the package inside, where he could unwrap it out of the damp and the blustery October wind. It was about three feet tall, and unexpectedly heavy. He carried it awkwardly, shutting the door with his foot and struggling down the long foyer toward his den. The brown drapes were tightly closed; the room was dark, and heavy with the smell of dust. Cantling had to set down the package to fumble for the light.

He hadn't used his den much since that night, two months ago, when Michelle had gone storming out. Her self-portrait was still sitting up above the wide slate mantle. Below, the fireplace badly wanted cleaning, and on the built-in bookshelves his novels, all bound in handsome dark leather, stood dusty and disarrayed. Cantling looked at the old painting and felt a brief wash of anger return to him, followed by depression. It had been such a nasty thing for her to do. The portrait had been quite good, really. Much more to his taste than the tortured abstractions that Michelle liked to paint for her own pleasure, or the trite paperback covers she did to make her living. She had done it when she was twenty, as a birthday gift for him. He'd always been fond of it. It captured her as no photograph had ever done, not just the lines of her face, the high angular cheekbones and blue eyes and tangled ash-blond hair, but the personality inside. She looked so young and fresh and confident, and her smile reminded him so much of Helen, and the way she had smiled on their wedding day. He'd told Michelle more than once how much he'd liked that smile.

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And so, of course, it had been the smile that she'd started on. She used an antique dagger from his collection, chopped out the mouth with four jagged slashes. She'd gouged out the wide blue eyes next, as if intent on blinding the portrait, and when he came bursting in after her, she'd been slicing the canvas into ribbons with long angry crooked cuts. Cantling couldn't forget the moment. So ugly. And to do something like that to her own work . . . he couldn't imagine it. He had tried to picture himself mutilating one of his books, tried to comprehend what might drive one to such an act, and he had failed utterly. It was unthinkable, beyond even imagination.

The mutilated portrait still hung in its place. He'd been too stubborn to take it down, and yet he could not bear to look at it. So he had taken to avoiding his den. It wasn't hard. The old house was a huge, rambling place, with more rooms than he could possibly need or want, living alone as he did. It had been built a century ago, when Perrot had been a thriving river town, and they said that a succession of steamer captains had lived there. Certainly the steamboat gothic architecture and all the gingerbread called up visions of the glory days on the river, and he had a fine view of the Mississippi from the third-story windows and the widow's walk. After the incident, Cantling had moved his desk and his typewriter to one of the unused bedrooms and settled in there, determined to let the den remain as Michelle had left it until she came back with an apology.

He had not expected that apology quite so soon, however, nor in quite this form. A tearful phone call, yes—but not another portrait. Still, this was nicer somehow, more personal. And it was a gesture, the first step toward a reconciliation. Richard Cantling knew too well that he was incapable of taking that step himself, no matter how lonely he might become. And he had been lonely, he did not try to fool himself on that score. He had left all his New York friends behind when he moved out to this Iowa river town, and had formed no local friendships to replace them. That was nothing new. He had never been an outgoing sort. He had a certain shyness that kept him apart, even from those few friends he did make. Even from his family, really. Helen had often accused him of caring more for his characters than for real people, an accusation that Michelle had picked up on by the time she was in her teens. Helen was gone too. They'd divorced ten years ago, and she'd been dead for five. Michelle, infuriating as she could be, was really all he had left. He had missed her, missed even the arguments.

He thought about Michelle as he tore open the plain brown paper. He would call her, of course. He would call her and tell her how good the new portrait was, how much he liked it. He would tell her that he'd missed her, invite her to come out for Thanksgiving. Yes, that would be

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the way to handle it. No mention of their argument, he didn't want to start it all up again, and neither he nor Michelle was the kind to back down gracefully. A family trait, that stubborn willful pride, as ingrained as the high cheekbones and squarish jaw. The Cantling heritage.

It was an antique frame, he saw. Wooden, elaborately carved, very heavy, just the sort of thing he liked. It would mesh with his Victorian decor much better than the thin brass frame on the old portrait. Cantling pulled the wrapping paper away, eager to see what his daughter had done. She was nearly thirty now—or was she past thirty already? He never could keep track of her age, or even her birthdays. Anyway, she was a much better painter than she'd been at twenty. The new portrait ought to be striking. He ripped away the last of the wrappings and turned it around.

His first reaction was that it was a fine, fine piece of work, maybe the best thing that Michelle Cantling had ever done.

Then, belatedly, the admiration washed away, and was replaced by anger. It wasn't her. It wasn't Michelle. Which meant it wasn't a replacement for the portrait she had so willfully vandalized. It was . . . something else.

Someone else.

It was a face he had never before laid eyes on. But it was a face he recognized as readily as if he had looked on it a thousand times. Oh, yes.

The man in the portrait was young. Twenty, maybe even younger, though his curly brown hair was already well-streaked with gray. It was unruly hair, disarrayed as if the man had just come from sleep, falling forward into his eyes. Those eyes were a bright green, lazy eyes somehow, shining with some secret amusement. He had high Cantling cheekbones, but the jawline was all wrong for a relative. Beneath a wide, flat nose, he wore a sardonic smile; his whole posture was somehow insolent. The portrait showed him dressed in faded dungarees and a ravelled WMCA Good Guy sweatshirt, with a half-eaten raw onion in one hand. The background was a brick wall covered with graffiti.

Cantling had created him.

Edward Donohue. Dunnahoo, that's what they'd called him, his friends and peers, the other characters in Richard Cantling's first novel, *Hangin' Out*. Dunnahoo had been the protagonist. A wise guy, a smart mouth, too damn bright for his own good. Looking down at the portrait, Cantling felt as if he'd known him for half his life. As indeed he had, in a way. Known him and, yes, cherished him, in the peculiar way a writer can cherish one of his characters.

Michelle had captured him true. Cantling stared at the painting and it all came back to him, all the events he had bled over so long ago, all the people he had fashioned and described with such loving care. He

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remembered Jocko, and the Squid, and Nancy, and Ricci's Pizzeria where so much of the book's action had taken place (he could see it vividly in his mind's eye), and the business with Arthur and the motorcycle, and the climactic pizza fight. And Dunnahoo. Dunnahoo especially. Smarting off, fooling around, hanging out, coming of age. "Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke," he said. A dozen times or so. It was the book's closing line.

For a moment, Richard Cantling felt a vast, strange affection well up inside him, as if he had just been reunited with an old, lost friend.

And then, almost as an afterthought, he remembered all the ugly words that he and Michelle had flung at each other that night, and suddenly it made sense. Cantling's face went hard. "Bitch," he said aloud. He turned away in fury, helpless without a target for his anger. "Bitch," he said again, as he slammed the door of the den behind him.

"Bitch," he had called her.

She turned around with the knife in her hand. Her eyes were raw and red from crying. She had the smile in her hand. She balled it up and threw it at him. "Here, you bastard, you like the damned smile so much, here it is."

It bounced off his cheek. His face was reddening. "You're just like your mother," he said. "She was always breaking things too."

"You gave her good reason, didn't you?"

Cantling ignored that. "What the hell is wrong with you? What the hell do you think you're going to accomplish with this stupid melodramatic gesture? That's all it is, you know. Bad melodrama. Who the hell do you think you are, some character in a Tennessee Williams play? Come off it, Michelle. If I wrote a scene like this in one of my books, they'd laugh at me."

"This isn't one of your goddamned books!" she screamed. "This is real life. *My* life. I'm a real person, you son of a bitch, not a character in some damned book." She whirled, raised the knife, slashed and slashed again.

Cantling folded his arms against his chest as he stood watching. "I hope you're enjoying this pointless exercise."

"I'm enjoying the hell out of it," Michelle yelled back.

"Good. I'd hate to think it was for nothing. This is all very revealing, you know. That's your own face you're working on. I didn't think you had that much self-hate in you."

"If I do, we know who put it there, don't we?" She was finished. She turned back to him, and threw down the knife. She had begun to cry again, and her breath was coming hard. "I'm leaving. Bastard. I hope you're ever so fucking happy here, really I do."

"I haven't done anything to deserve this," Cantling said awkwardly. It was not much of an apology, not much of a bridge back to understand-

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ing, but it was the best he could do. Apologies had never come easily to Richard Cantling.

"You deserve a thousand times worse," Michelle had screamed back at him. She was such a pretty girl, and she looked so ugly. All that nonsense about anger making people beautiful was a dreadful cliche, and wrong as well; Cantling was glad he'd never used it. "You're supposed to be my father," Michelle said. "You're supposed to love me. You're supposed to be my father, and you *raped* me, you bastard."

Cantling was a light sleeper. He woke in the middle of the night, and sat up in bed shivering, with the feeling that something was wrong.

The bedroom seemed dark and quiet. What was it? A noise? He was very sensitive to noise. Cantling slid out from under the covers and donned his slippers. The fire he'd enjoyed before retiring for the night had burned down to embers, and the room was chilly. He felt for his tartan robe, hanging from the foot of the big antique four-poster, slipped into it, cinched the belt, and moved quietly to the bedroom door. The door creaked a little at times, so he opened it very slowly, very cautiously. He listened.

Someone was downstairs. He could hear them moving around.

Fear coiled in the pit of his stomach. He had no gun up here, nothing like that. He didn't believe in that. Besides, he was supposed to be safe. This wasn't New York. He was supposed to be safe here in quaint old Perrot, Iowa. And now he had a prowler in his house, something he had never faced in all of his years in Manhattan. What the hell was he supposed to do?

The police, he thought. He'd lock the door and call the police. He moved back to the bedside, and reached for the phone.

It rang.

Richard Cantling stared at the telephone. He had two lines; a business number hooked up to his recording machine, and an unlisted personal number that he gave only to very close friends. Both lights were lit. It was his private number ringing. He hesitated, then scooped up the receiver. "Hello."

"The man himself," the voice said. "Don't get weird on me, Dad. You were going to call the cops, right? Stupid. It's only me. Come down and talk."

Cantling's throat felt raw and constricted. He had never heard that voice before, but he knew it, he knew it. "Who is this?" he demanded.

"Silly question," the caller replied. "You know who it is."

He did. But he said, "Who?"

"Not who. Dunnahoo." Cantling had written that line.

"You're not real."

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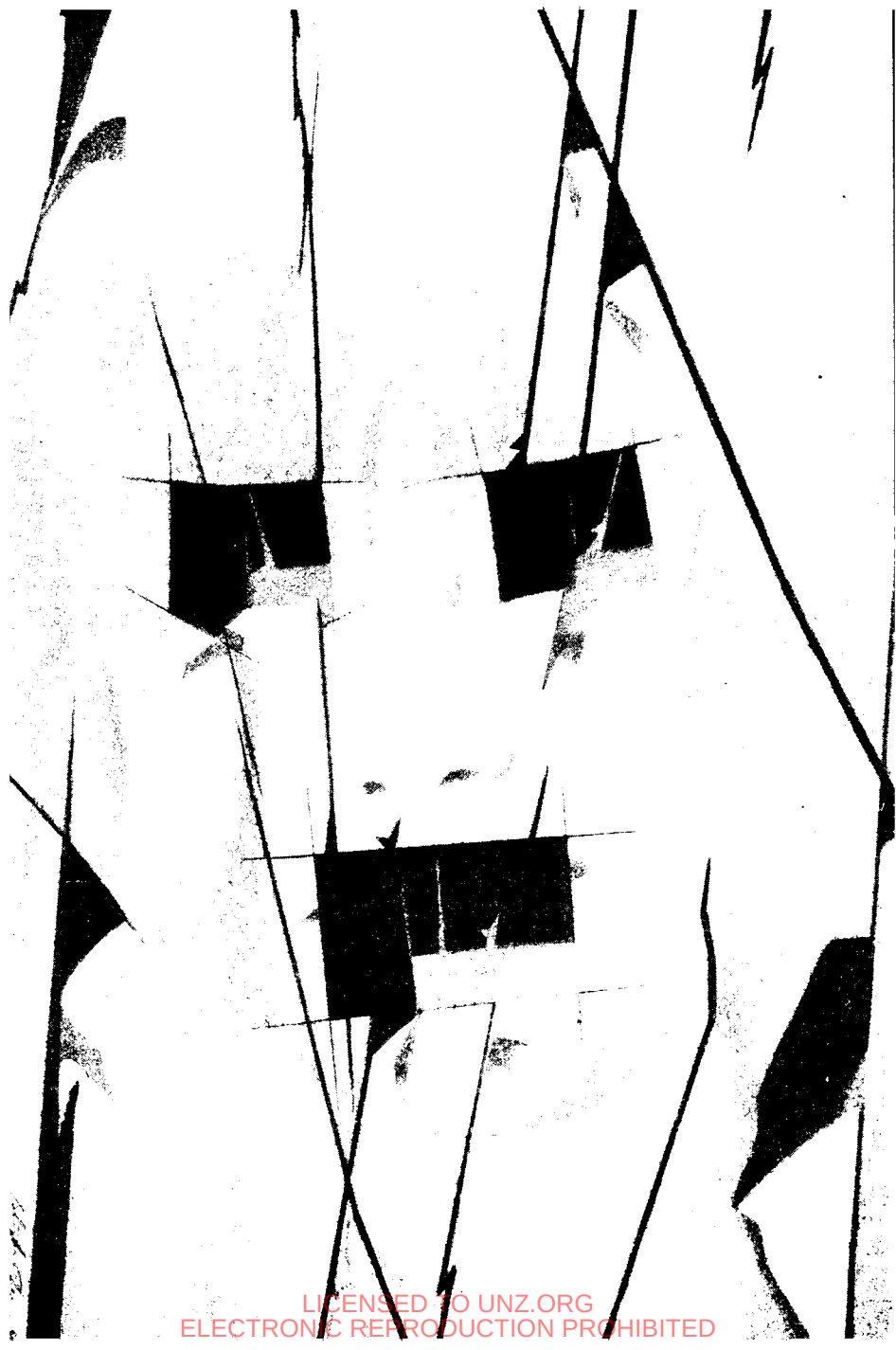

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"There were a couple of reviewers who said that too. I seem to remember how it pissed you off, back then."

"You're not *real*," Cantling insisted.

"I'm cut to the goddamned quick," Dunnahoo said. "If I'm not real, it's your fault. So quit getting on my case about it, OK? Just get your ass in gear and hustle it downstairs so we can hang out together." He hung up.

The lights went out on the telephone. Richard Cantling sat down on the edge of his bed, stunned. What was he supposed to make of this? A dream? It was no dream. What could he do?

He went downstairs.

Dunnahoo had built a fire in the living room fireplace, and was settled into Cantling's big leather recliner, drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon from a bottle. He smiled lazily when Cantling appeared under the entry arch. "The man," he said. "Well, don't you look half-dead. Want a beer?"

"Who the hell are you?" Cantling demanded.

"Hey, we been round that block already. Don't bore me. Grab a beer and park your ass by the fire."

"An actor," Cantling said. "You're some kind of goddamned actor. Michelle put you up to this, right?"

Dunnahoo grinned. "An actor? Well, that's fuckin' unlikely, ain't it? Tell me, would you stick something that weird in one of your novels? No way, José. You'd never do it yourself and if somebody else did it, in one of them workshops or a book you were reviewing, you'd rip his fuckin' liver out."

Richard Cantling moved slowly into the room, staring at the young man sprawled in his recliner. It was no actor. It was Dunnahoo, the kid from his book, the face from the portrait. Cantling settled into a high, overstuffed armchair, still staring. "This makes no sense," he said. "This is like something out of Dickens."

Dunnahoo laughed. "This ain't no fucking Christmas Carol, old man, and I sure ain't no ghost of Christmas past."

Cantling frowned; whoever he was, that line was out of character. "That's wrong," he snapped. "Dunnahoo didn't read Dickens. Batman and Robin, yes, but not Dickens."

"I saw the movie, dad," Dunnahoo said. He raised the beer bottle to his lips and had a swallow.

"Why do you keep calling me Dad?" Cantling said. "That's wrong too. Anachronistic. Dunnahoo was a street kid, not a beatnik."

"You're telling me? Like I don't know or something?" He laughed. "Shit man, what the hell else should I call you?" He ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back out of his eyes. "After all, I'm still your fuckin' first-born."

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* * *

She wanted to name it Edward, if it turned out to be a boy. "Don't be ridiculous, Helen," he told her.

"I thought you liked the name Edward," she said.

He didn't know what she was doing in his office anyway. He was working, or trying to work. He'd told her never to come into his office when he was at the typewriter. When they were first married, Helen was very good about that, but there had been no dealing with her since she'd gotten pregnant. "I do like the name Edward," he told her, trying hard to keep his voice calm. He hated being interrupted. "I like the name Edward a lot. I love the goddamned name Edward. That's why I'm using it for my protagonist. Edward, that's his name. Edward Donohue. So we can't use it for the baby because I've already used it. How many times do I have to explain that?"

"But you never *call* him Edward in the book," Helen protested.

Cantling frowned. "Have you been reading the book again? Damn it, Helen, I *told* you I don't want you messing around with the manuscript until it's done."

She refused to be distracted. "You never call him Edward," she repeated.

"No," he said. "That's right. I never call him Edward. I call him Dunnahoo, because he's a street kid, and because that's his street name, and he doesn't like to be called Edward. Only it's still his name, you see. Edward is his name. He doesn't like it, but it's his fucking *name,* and at the end he tells someone that his name is Edward, and that's real damned important. So we can't name the kid Edward, because *he's* named Edward, and I'm tired of this discussion. If it's a boy, we can name it Lawrence, after my grandfather."

"But I don't *want* to name him Lawrence," she whined. "It's so old-fashioned, and then people will call him Larry, and I hate the name Larry. Why can't you call the character in your book Lawrence?"

"Because his name is Edward."

"This is our baby I'm carrying," she said. She put a hand on her swollen stomach, as if Cantling needed a visual reminder.

He was tired of arguing. He was tired of discussing. He was tired of being interrupted. He leaned back in his chair. "How long have you been carrying the baby?"

Helen looked baffled. "You know. Seven months now. And a week."

Cantling leaned forward and slapped the stack of manuscript pages piled up beside his typewriter. "Well, I've been carrying *this* baby for three damned years now. This is the fourth fucking draft, and the last one. He was named Edward on the first draft, and on the second draft, and on the third draft, and he's damn well going to be named Edward

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when the goddamned book comes out. He'd been named Edward for *years* before that night of fond memory when you decided to surprise me by throwing away your diaphragm, and thereby got yourself knocked up."

"It's not fair," she complained. "He's only a character. This is our baby."

"Fair? You want fair? OK. I'll make it fair. Our first-born son will get named Edward. How's that for fair?"

Helen's face softened. She smiled shyly.

He held up a hand before she had a chance to say anything. "Of course, I figure I'm only about a month away from finishing this damn thing, if you ever stop interrupting me. You've got a little further to go. But that's as fair as I can make it. You pop before I type THE END and you got the name. Otherwise, my baby here—" he slapped the manuscript again "is—first-born."

"You can't," she started.

Cantling resumed his typing.

"My first-born," Richard Cantling said.

"In the flesh," Dunnahoo said. He raised his beer bottle in salute, and said, "To fathers and sons, hey!" He drained it with one long swallow and flipped the bottle across the room end over end. It smashed in the fireplace.

"This is a dream," Cantling said.

Dunnahoo gave him a raspberry. "Look, old man, face it, I'm here." He jumped to his feet. "The prodigal returns," he said, bowing. "So where the fuck is the fatted calf and all that shit? Least you coulda done was order a pizza."

"I'll play the game," Cantling said. "What do you want from me?"

Dunnahoo grinned. "Want? Who, me? Who the fuck knows? I never knew what I wanted, you know that. Nobody in the whole fucking book knew what they wanted."

"That was the point," Cantling said.

"Oh, I get it," Dunnahoo said. "I'm not dumb. Old Dicky Cantling's boy is anything but dumb, right?" He wandered off toward the kitchen. "There's more beer in the fridge. Want one?"

"Why not?" Cantling asked. "It's not every day my oldest son comes to visit. Dos Equis with a slice of lime, please."

"Drinking fancy spic beer now, huh? Shit. What ever happened to Piels? You could suck up Piels with the best of them, once upon a time." He vanished through the kitchen door. When he returned he was carrying two bottles of Dos Equis, holding them by the necks with his fingers jammed down into the open mouths. In his other hand he had a raw onion. The bottles clanked together as he carried them. He gave one to Cantling. "Here. I'll suck up a little culture myself."

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"You forgot the lime," Cantling said.

"Get your own fuckin' lime," Dunnahoo said. "Whatcha gonna do, cut off my allowance?" He grinned, tossed the onion lightly into the air, caught it, and took a big bite. "Onions," he said. "I owe you for that one, Dad. Bad enough I have to eat raw onions, I mean, shit, but you fixed it so I don't even *like* the fucking things. You even said so in the damned book."

"Of course," Cantling said. "The onion had a dual function. On one level, you did it just to prove how tough you were. It was something none of the others hanging out at Ricci's could manage. It gave you a certain status. But on a deeper level, when you bit into an onion you were making a symbolic statement about your appetite for life, your hunger for it all, the bitter and the sharp parts as well the sweet."

Dunnahoo took another bite of onion. "Horseshit," he said. "I ought to make you eat a fucking onion, see how you like it."

Cantling sipped at his beer. "I was young. It was my first book. It seemed like a nice touch at the time."

"Eat it raw," Dunnahoo said. He finished the onion.

Richard Cantling decided this cozy domestic scene had gone on long enough. "You know, Dunnahoo or whoever you are," he said in a conversational tone, "you're not what I expected."

"What did you expect, old man?"

Cantling shrugged. "I made you with my mind instead of my sperm, so you've got more of me in you than any child of my flesh could ever have. You're me."

"Hey," said Dunnahoo, "not fucking guilty. I wouldn't be you on a bet."

"You have no choice. Your story was built from my own adolescence. First novels are like that. Ricci's was really Pompeii Pizza in Newark. Your friends were my friends. And you were me."

"That so?" Dunnahoo replied, grinning.

Richard Cantling nodded.

Dunnahoo laughed. "You should be so fuckin' lucky, Dad."

"What does that mean?" Cantling snapped.

"You live in a dream world, old man, you know that? Maybe you like to pretend you were like me, but there ain't no way it's true. I was the big man at Ricci's. At Pompeii, you were the four-eyes hanging out back by the pinball machine. You had me balling my brains out at sixteen. You never even got bare tit till you were past twenty, off in that college of yours. It took you weeks to come up with the wisecracks you had me tossing off every fuckin' time I turned around. All those wild, crazy things I did in that book, some of them happened to Dutch and some of them happened to Joey and some of them never happened at all, but none of them happened to you, old man, so don't make me laugh."

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Cantling flushed a little. "I was writing fiction. Yes, I was a bit of a misfit in my youth, but . . ."

"A nerd," Dunnahoo said. "Don't fancy it up."

"I was not a nerd," Cantling said, stung. *"Hangin' Out* told the truth. It made sense to use a protagonist who was more central to the action than I'd been in real life. Art draws on life but it has to shape it, rearrange it, give it structure, it can't simply replicate it. That's what I did."

"Nah. What *you* did was to suck off Dutch and Joey and the rest. You helped yourself to their lives, man, and took credit for it all yourself. You even got this weird fuckin' idea that I was based on you, and you been thinking that so long you believe it. You're a leech, Dad. You're a god-damned thief."

Richard Cantling was furious. "Get out of here!" he said.

Dunnahoo stood up, stretched. "I'm fuckin' wounded. Throwing your baby boy out into the cold Ioway night, old man? What's wrong? You liked me well enough when I was in your damn book, when you could control everything I did and said, right? Don't like it so well now that I'm real, though. That's your problem. You never did like real life half as well as you liked books."

"I like life just fine, thank you," Cantling snapped.

Dunnahoo smiled. Standing there, he suddenly looked washed out, insubstantial. "Yeah?" he said. His voice seemed weaker than it had been.

"Yeah!" Cantling replied.

Now Dunnahoo was fading visibly. All the color had drained from his body, and he looked almost transparent. "Prove it," he said. "Go into your kitchen, old man, and take a great big bite out of your fuckin' raw onion of life." He tossed back his hair, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed, until he was quite gone.

Richard Cantling stood staring at the place where he had been for a long time. Finally, very tired, he climbed upstairs to bed.

He made himself a big breakfast the next morning: orange juice and fresh-brewed coffee, English muffins with lots of butter and blackberry preserves, a cheese omelette, six strips of thick-sliced bacon. The cooking and the eating were supposed to distract him. It didn't work. He thought of Dunnahoo all the while. A dream, yes, some crazy sort of dream. He had no ready explanation for the broken glass in the fireplace or the empty beer bottles in his living room, but finally he found one. He had experienced some sort of insane, drunken, somnambulist episode, Cantling decided. It was the stress of the ongoing quarrel with Michelle, of course, triggered by the portrait she'd sent him. Perhaps he ought to see someone about it, a doctor or a psychologist or someone.

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After breakfast, Cantling went straight to his den, determined to confront the problem directly and resolve it. Michelle's mutilated portrait still hung above the fireplace. A festering wound, he thought; it had infected him, and the time had come to get rid of it. Cantling built a fire. When it was going good, he took down the ruined painting, dismantled the metal frame—he was a thrifty man, after all—and burned the torn, disfigured canvas. The oily smoke made him feel clean again.

Next there was the portrait of Dunnahoo to deal with. Cantling turned to consider it. A good piece of work, really. She had captured the character. He could burn it, but that would be playing Michelle's own destructive game. Art should never be destroyed. He had made his mark on the world by creation, not destruction, and he was too old to change. The portrait of Dunnahoo had been intended as a cruel taunt, but Cantling decided to throw it back in his daughter's teeth, to make a splendid celebration of it. He would hang it, and hang it prominently. He knew just the place for it.

Up at the top of the stairs was a long landing; an ornate wooden bannister overlooked the first floor foyer and entry hall. The landing was fifteen feet long, and the back wall was entirely blank. It would make a splendid portrait gallery, Cantling decided. The painting would be visible to anyone entering the house, and you would pass right by it on the way to any of the second floor rooms. He found a hammer and some nails and hung Dunnahoo in a place of honor. When Michelle came back to make peace, she would see him there, and no doubt leap to the conclusion that Cantling had totally missed the point of her gift. He'd have to remember to thank her effusively for it.

Richard Cantling was feeling much better. Last night's conversation was receding into a bad memory. He put it firmly out of his mind and spent the rest of the day writing letters to his agent and publisher. In the late afternoon, pleasantly weary, he enjoyed a cup of coffee and some butter streusel he'd hidden away in the refrigerator. Then he went out on his daily walk, and spent a good ninety minutes hiking along the river bluffs with a fresh, cold wind in his face.

When he returned, a large square package was waiting on his porch.

He leaned it up against an armchair, and settled into his recliner to study it. It made him uneasy. It had an effect, no doubt of it. He could feel an erection stirring against his leg, pressing uncomfortably against his trousers.

The portrait was . . . well, frankly erotic.

She was in bed, a big old antique four-poster, much like his own. She was naked. She was half-turned in the painting, looking back over her right shoulder; you saw the smooth line of her backbone, the curve of

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her right breast. It was a large, shapely, and very pretty breast; the aureole was a pale pink and very large, and her nipple was erect. She was clutching a rumpled sheet up to her chin, but it did little to conceal her. Her hair was red-gold, her eyes green, her smile playful. Her smooth young skin had a flush to it, as if she had just risen from a bout of lovemaking. She had a peace symbol tattooed high on the right cheek of her ass. She was obviously very young. Richard Cantling knew just how young: she was eighteen, a child-woman, caught in that precious time between innocence and experience when sex is just a wonderfully exciting new toy. Oh yes, he knew a lot about her. He knew her well.

Cissy.

He hung her portrait next to Dunnahoo.

Dead Flowers was Cantling's title for the book. His editor changed it to *Black Roses;* more evocative, he said, more romantic, more upbeat. Cantling fought the change on artistic grounds, and lost. Afterwards, when the novel made the bestseller lists, he managed to work up the grace to admit that he'd been wrong. He sent Brian a bottle of his favorite wine.

It was his fourth novel, and his last chance. *Hangin' Out* had gotten excellent reviews and had sold decently, but his next two books had been panned by the critics and ignored by the readers. He had to do something different, and he did. *Black Roses* turned out to be highly controversial. Some reviewers loved it, some loathed it. But it sold and sold and sold, and the paperback sale and the film option (they never made the movie) relieved him of financial worries for the first time in his life. They were finally able to afford a down payment on a house, transfer Michelle to a private school and get her those braces; the rest of the money Cantling invested as shrewdly as he was able. He was proud of *Black Roses* and pleased by its success. It made his reputation.

Helen hated the book with a passion.

On the day the novel finally fell off the last of the lists, she couldn't quite conceal her satisfaction. "I knew it wouldn't last forever," she said.

Cantling slapped down the newspaper angrily. "It lasted long enough. What the hell's wrong with you? You didn't like it before, when we were barely scraping by. The kid needs braces, the kid needs a better school, the kid shouldn't have to eat goddamn peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every day. Well, that's all behind us. And you're more pissed off than ever. Give me a little credit. Did you like being married to a failure?"

"I don't like being married to a pornographer," Helen snapped at him.

"Fuck you," Cantling said.

She gave him a nasty smile. "When? You haven't touched me in weeks. You'd rather be fucking your Cissy."

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Cantling stared at her. "Are you crazy, or what? She's a character in a book I wrote. That's all."

"Oh, go to hell," Helen said furiously. "You treat me like I'm a goddamned idiot. You think I can't read? You think I don't know? I read your shitty book. I'm not stupid. The wife, Marsha, dull ignorant boring Marsha, cud-chewing mousy Marsha, that cow, that nag, that royal pain-in-the-ass, that's me. You think I can't tell? I can tell, and so can my friends. They're all very sorry for me. You love me as much as Richardson loved Marsha. Cissy's just a character, right, like hell, like bloody hell." She was crying now. "You're in love with her, damn you. She's your own little wet dream. If she walked in the door right now you'd dump me as fast as Richardson dumps good old Marsha. Deny it. Go on, deny it, I dare you!"

Cantling regarded his wife incredulously. "I don't believe you. You're jealous of a character in my book. You're jealous of someone who doesn't exist."

"She exists in your head, and that's the only place that matters with you. Of course your damned book was a big seller. You think it was because of your writing? It was on account of the sex, on account of *her!*"

"Sex is an important part of life," Cantling said defensively. "It's a perfectly legitimate subject for art. You want me to pull down a curtain every time my characters go to bed, is that it? Coming to terms with sexuality, that's what *Black Roses* is all about. Of course it had to be written explicitly. If you weren't such a damned prude you'd realize that."

"I'm not a prude!" Helen screamed at him. "Don't you dare call me one, either." She picked up one of the breakfast plates and threw it at him. Cantling ducked; the plate shattered on the wall behind him. "Just because I don't like your goddamned filthy book doesn't make me a prude."

"The novel has nothing to do with it," Cantling said. He folded his arms against his chest but kept his voice calm. "You're a prude because of the things you do in bed. Or should I say the things you won't do?" He smiled.

Helen's face was red; beet red, Canting thought, and rejected it, too old, too trite. "Oh, yes, but she'll do them, won't she?" Her voice was pure acid. "Cissy, your cute little Cissy. She'll get a sexy little tattoo on her ass if you ask her to, right? She'll do it outdoors, she'll do it in all kinds of strange places, with people all around. She'll wear kinky underwear, she thinks it's fun. She's always ready and she doesn't have any stretch marks and she has eighteen-year-old tits, and she'll *always* have eighteen-year-old tits, won't she? How the hell do I compete with that, huh? How? *HOW?"*

Richard Cantling's own anger was a cold, controlled, sarcastic thing.

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He stood up in the face of her fury and smiled sweetly. "Read the book," he said. "Take notes."

He woke suddenly, in darkness, to the light touch of skin against his foot.

Cissy was perched on top of the footboard, a red satin sheet wrapped around her, a long slim leg exploring under his blankets. She was playing footsie with him, and smiling mischievously. "Hi, Daddy," she said.

Cantling had been afraid of this. It had been in his mind all evening. Sleep had not come easily. He pulled his foot away and struggled to a sitting position.

Cissy pouted. "Don't you want to play?" she asked.

"I," he said, "don't believe this. This can't be real."

"It can still be fun," she said.

"What the hell is Michelle doing to me? How can this be happening?"

She shrugged. The sheet slipped a little; one perfect pink-tipped eighteen-year-old breast peeked out.

"You still have eighteen-year-old tits," Cantling said numbly. "You'll always have eighteen-year-old tits."

Cissy laughed. "Sure. You can borrow them, if you like, Daddy. I'll bet you can think of something interesting to do with them."

"Stop calling me Daddy," Cantling said.

"Oh, but you *are* my Daddy," Cissy said in her little-girl voice.

"Stop that!" Cantling said.

"Why? You want to, Daddy, you want to play with your little girl, don't you?" She winked. "Vice is nice but incest is best. The families that play together stay together." She looked around. "I like four-posters. You want to tie me up, Daddy? I'd like that."

"No," Cantling said. He pushed back the covers, got out of bed, found his slippers and robe. His erection throbbed against his leg. He had to get away, he had to put some distance between him and Cissy, otherwise . . . he didn't want to think about otherwise. He busied himself making a fire.

"I like that," Cissy said when he got it going. "Fires are so romantic."

Cantling turned around to face her again. "Why you?" he asked, trying to stay calm. "Richardson was the protagonist of *Black Roses,* not you. And why skip to my fourth book? Why not somebody from *Family Tree* or *Rain*?"

"Those gobblers?" Cissy said. "Nobody real there. You didn't really want Richardson, did you? I'm a lot more fun." She stood up and let go of the satin sheet. It puddled about her ankles, the flames reflected off its shiny folds. Her body was soft and sweet and young. She kicked free of the sheet and padded toward him.

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"Cut it out, Cissy," Cantling barked.

"I won't bite," Cissy said. She giggled. "Unless you want me to. Maybe I should tie *you* up, huh?" She put her arms around him, gave him a hug, turned up her face for a kiss.

"Let go of me," he said, weakly. Her arms felt good. She felt good as she pressed up against him. It had been a long time since Richard Cantling had held a woman in his arms; he didn't like to think about how long. And he had never had a woman like Cissy, never, never. But he was frightened. "I can't do this," he said. "I can't. I don't want to."

Cissy reached through the folds of his robe, shoved her hand inside his briefs, squeezed him gently. "Liar," she said. "You want me. You've always wanted me. I'll bet you used to stop and jack off when you were writing the sex scenes."

"No," Cantling said. "Never."

"Never?" She pouted. Her hand moved up and down. "Well, I bet you wanted to. I bet you got hard, anyway. I bet you got hard every time you described me."

"I," he said. The denial would not come. "Cissy, please."

"Please," she murmured. Her hand was busy. "Yes, please." She tugged at his briefs and they fluttered to the floor. "Please," she said. She untied his robe and helped him out of it. "Please." Her hand moved along his side, played with his nipples; she stepped closer, and her breasts pressed lightly against his chest. "Please," she said, and she looked up at him. Her tongue moved between her lips.

Richard Cantling groaned and took her in his trembling arms.

She was like no woman he had ever had. Her touch was fire and satin, electric, and her secret places were sweet as honey.

In the morning she was gone.

Cantling woke late, too exhausted to make himself breakfast. Instead he dressed and walked into town, to a small cafe in a quaint hundred-year-old brick building at the foot of the bluffs. He tried to sort things out over coffee and blueberry pancakes.

None of it made any sense. It could not be happening, but it was; denial accomplished nothing. Cantling forked down a mouthful of home-made blueberry pancake, but the only taste in his mouth was fear. He was afraid for his sanity. He was afraid because he did not understand, did not want to understand. And there was another, deeper, more basic fear.

He was afraid of what would come next. Richard Cantling had published nine novels.

He thought of Michelle. He could phone her, beg her to call it off before he went mad. She was his daughter, his flesh and blood, surely she would listen to him. She loved him. Of course she did. And he loved her too, no

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matter what she might think. Cantling knew his faults. He had examined himself countless times, under various guises, in the pages of his books. He was impossibly stubborn, willful, opinionated. He could be rigid and unbending. He could be cold. Still, he thought of himself as a decent man. Michelle . . . she had inherited some of his perversity, she was furious at him, hate was so very close to love, but surely she did not mean to do him serious harm.

Yes, he could phone Michelle, ask her to stop. Would she? If he begged her forgiveness, perhaps. That day, that terrible day, she'd told him that she would never forgive him, never, but she couldn't have meant that. She was his only child. The only child of his flesh, at any rate.

Cantling pushed away his empty plate and sat back. His mouth was set in a hard rigid line. Beg for mercy? He did not like that. What had he done, after all? Why couldn't they understand? Helen had never understood and Michelle was as blind as her mother. A writer must live for his work. What had he done that was so terrible? What had he done that required forgiveness? Michelle ought to be the one phoning him.

The hell with it, Cantling thought. He refused to be cowed. He was right; she was wrong. Let Michelle call him if she wanted a rapprochement. She was not going to terrify him into submission. What was he so afraid of, anyway? Let her send her portraits, all the portraits she wanted to paint. He'd hang them up on his walls, display the paintings proudly (they were really an *hommage* to his work, after all), and if the damned things came alive at night and prowled through his house, so be it. He'd enjoy their visits. Cantling smiled. He'd certainly enjoyed Cissy, no doubt of that. Part of him hoped she'd come back. And even Dunnahoo, well, he was an insolent kid, but there was no real harm in him, he just liked to mouth off.

Why, now that he stopped to consider it, Cantling found that the possibilities had a certain intoxicating charm. He was uniquely privileged. Scott Fitzgerald never attended one of Gatsby's fabulous parties, Conan Doyle could never really sit down with Holmes and Watson, Nabokov never actually tumbled Lolita. What would they have said to the idea?

The more he considered things, the more cheerful he became. Michelle was trying to rebuke him, to frighten him, but she was really giving him a delicious experience. He could play chess with Sergei Tederenko, the cynical emigré hustler from *En Passant*. He could argue politics with Frank Corwin, the union organizer from his Depression novel, *Times Are Hard*. He might flirt with beautiful Beth McKenzie, go dancing with crazy old Miss Aggie, seduce the Danzinger twins and fulfill the one sexual fantasy that Cissy had left untouched, yes, certainly, what the hell had he been afraid of? They were his own creations, his characters, his friends and family.

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Of course, there was the new book to consider. Cantling frowned. That was a disturbing thought. But Michelle was his daughter, she loved him, surely she wouldn't go that far. No, of course not. He put the idea firmly aside and picked up his check.

He expected it. He was almost looking forward to it. And when he returned from his evening constitutional, his cheeks red from the wind, his heart beating just a little faster in anticipation, it was there waiting for him, the familiar rectangle wrapped in plain brown paper. Richard Cantling carried it inside carefully. He made himself a cup of coffee before he unwrapped it, deliberately prolonging the suspense to savor the moment, delighting in the thought of how deftly he'd turned Michelle's cruel little plan on its head.

He drank his coffee, poured a refill, drank that. The package stood a few feet away. Cantling played a little game with himself, trying to guess whose portrait might be within. Cissy had said something about none of the characters from *Family Tree* or *Rain* being real enough. Cantling mentally reviewed his life's work, trying to decide which characters seemed most real. It was a pleasant speculation, but he could reach no firm conclusions. Finally he shoved his coffee cup aside and moved to undo the wrappings. And there it was.

Barry Leighton.

Again, the painting itself was superb. Leighton was seated in a newspaper city room, his elbow resting on the gray metal case of an old manual typewriter. He wore a rumpled brown suit and his white shirt was open at the collar and plastered to his body by perspiration. His nose had been broken more than once, and was spread all across his wide, homely, somehow comfortable face. His eyes were sleepy. Leighton was overweight and jowly and rapidly losing his hair. He'd given up smoking but not cigarettes; an unlit Camel dangled from one corner of his mouth. "As long as you don't light the damned things, you're safe," he'd said more than once in Cantling's novel *ByeLine*.

The book hadn't done very well. It was a depressing book, all about the last week of a grand old newspaper that had fallen on bad times. It was more than that, though. Cantling was interested in people, not newspapers; he had used the failing paper as a metaphor for failing lives. His editor had wanted to work in some kind of strong, sensational subplot, have Leighton and the others on the trail of some huge story that offered the promise of redemption, but Cantling had rejected that idea. He wanted to tell a story about small people being ground down inexorably by time and age, about the inevitability of loneliness and defeat. He produced a novel as gray and brittle as newsprint. He was very proud of it.

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No one read it.

Cantling lifted the portrait and carried it upstairs, to hang beside those of Dunnahoo and Cissy. Tonight should be interesting, he thought. Barry Leighton was no kid, like the others; he was a man of Cantling's own years. Very intelligent, mature. There was a bitterness in Leighton, Cantling knew very well; a disappointment that life had, after all, yielded so little, that all his bylines and big stories were forgotten the day after they ran. But the reporter kept his sense of humor through all of it, kept off the demons with nothing but a mordant wit and an unlit Camel. Cantling admired him, would enjoy talking to him. Tonight, he decided, he wouldn't bother going to bed. He'd make a big pot of strong black coffee, lay in some Seagram's, and wait.

It was past midnight and Cantling was rereading the leather-bound copy of *ByeLine* when he heard ice cubes clinking together in the kitchen. "Help yourself, Barry," he called out.

Leighton came through the swinging door, tumbler in hand. "I did," he said. He looked at Cantling through heavily-lidded eyes, and gave a little snort. "You look old enough to be my father," he said. "I didn't think anybody could look *that* old."

Cantling closed the book and set it aside. "Sit down," he said. "As I recall, your feet hurt."

"My feet always hurt," Leighton said. He settled himself into an armchair and swallowed a mouthful of whisky. "Ah," he said, "that's better."

Cantling tapped the novel with a fingertip. "My eighth book," he said. "Michelle skipped right over three novels. A pity. I would have liked to meet some of those people."

"Maybe she wants to get to the point," Leighton suggested.

"And what is the point?"

Leighton shrugged. "Damned if I know. I'm only a newspaperman. Five Ws and an H. You're the novelist. You tell me the point."

"My ninth novel," Cantling suggested. "The new one."

"The last one?" said Leighton.

"Of course not. Only the most recent. I'm working on something new right now."

Leighton smiled. "That's not what my sources tell me."

"Oh? What do your sources say?"

"That you're an old man waiting to die," Leighton said. "And that you're going to die alone."

"I'm fifty-two," Cantling said crisply. "Hardly old."

"When your birthday cake has got more candles than you can blow out, you're old," said Leighton drily. "Helen was younger than you, and she died five years ago. It's in the mind, Cantling. I've seen young oc-

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togenarians and old adolescents. And you, you had liver spots on your brain before you had hair on your balls."

"That's unfair," Cantling protested.

Leighton drank his Seagram's. "Fair?" he said. "You're too old to believe in fair, Cantling. Young people live life. Old people sit and watch it. You were born old. You're a watcher, not a liver." He frowned. "Not a liver, jeez, what a figure of speech. Better a liver than a gall bladder, I guess. You were never a gall bladder either. You've been full of piss for years, but you don't have any gall at all. Maybe you're a kidney."

"You're reaching, Barry," Cantling said. "I'm a writer. I've always been a writer. That's my life. Writers observe life, they report on life. It's in the job description. You ought to know."

"I do know," Leighton said. "I'm a reporter, remember? I've spent a lot of long gray years writing up other people's stories. I've got no story of my own. You know that, Cantling. Look what you did to me in *ByeLine*. The *Courier* croaks and I decide to write my memoirs and what happens?"

Cantling remembered. "You blocked. You rewrote your old stories, twenty-year-old stories, thirty-year-old stories. You had that incredible memory. You could recall all the people you'd ever reported on, the dates, the details, the quotes. You could recite the first story you'd had bylined word for word, but you couldn't remember the name of the first girl you'd been to bed with, couldn't remember your ex-wife's phone number, you couldn't . . . you couldn't. . . ." His voice failed.

"I couldn't remember my daughter's birthday," Leighton said. "Where do you get those crazy ideas, Cantling?"

Cantling was silent.

"From life, maybe?" Leighton said gently. "I was a good reporter. That was about all you could say about me. You, well, maybe you're a good novelist. That's for the critics to judge, and I'm just a sweaty newspaperman whose feet hurt. But even if you are a good novelist, even if you're one of the great ones, you were a lousy husband, and a miserable father."

"No," Cantling said. It was a weak protest.

Leighton swirled his tumbler; the ice cubes clinked and clattered. "When did Helen leave you?" he asked.

"I don't . . . ten years ago, something like that. I was in the middle of the final draft of *En Passant*."

"When was the divorce final?"

"Oh, a year later. We tried a reconciliation, but it didn't take. Michelle was in school, I remember. I was writing *Times Are Hard*."

"You remember her third grade play?"

"Was that the one I missed?"

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"The one you missed? You sound like Nixon saying, 'Was that the time I lied?' That was the one Michelle had the lead in, Cantling."

"I couldn't help that," Cantling said. "I wanted to come. They were giving me an award. You don't skip the National Literary League dinner. You can't."

"Of course not," said Leighton. "When was it that Helen died?"

"I was writing *ByeLine*," Cantling said.

"Interesting system of dating you've got there. You ought to put out a calendar." He swallowed some whisky.

"All right," Cantling said. "I'm not going to deny that my work is important to me. Maybe too important, I don't know. Yes, the writing has been the biggest part of my life. But I'm a decent man, Leighton, and I've always done my best. It hasn't all been like you're implying. Helen and I had good years. We loved each other once. And Michelle . . . I loved Michelle. When she was a little girl, I used to write stories just for her. Funny animals, space pirates, silly poems. I'd write them up in my spare time and read them to her at bedtime. They were something I did just for Michelle, for love."

"Yeah," Leighton said cynically. "You never even thought about getting them published."

Cantling grimaced. "That . . . you're implying . . . that's a distortion. Michelle loved the stories so much, I thought maybe other kids might like them too. It was just an idea. I never did anything about it."

"Never?"

Cantling hesitated. "Look, Bert was my friend as well as my agent. He had a little girl of his own. I showed him the stories once. Once!"

"I can't be pregnant," Leighton said. "I only let him fuck me once. Once!"

"He didn't even like them," Cantling said.

"Pity," replied Leighton.

"You're laying this on me with a trowel, and I'm not guilty. No, I wasn't father of the year, but I wasn't an ogre either. I changed her diaper plenty of times. Before *Black Roses,* Helen had to work, and I took care of the baby every day, from nine to five."

"You hated it when she cried and you had to leave your typewriter."

"Yes," Cantling said. "Yes, I hated being interrupted, I've always hated being interrupted, I don't care if it was Helen or Michelle or my mother or my roommate in college, when I'm writing I don't like to be interrupted. Is that a fucking capital crime? Does that make me inhuman? When she cried, I went to her. I didn't like it, I hated it, I resented it, but I *went to her.*"

"When you heard her," said Leighton. "When you weren't in bed with Cissy, dancing with Miss Aggie, beating up scabs with Frank Corwin,

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when your head wasn't full of their voices, yeah, sometimes you heard, and when you heard you went. Congratulations, Cantling."

"I taught her to read," Cantling said. "I read her *Treasure Island* and *Wind in the Willows* and *The Hobbit* and *Tom Sawyer,* all kinds of things."

"All books you wanted to reread anyway," said Leighton. "Helen did the real teaching, with Dick and Jane."

"*I hate Dick and Jane!*" Cantling shouted.

"So?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Richard Cantling said. "You weren't there. Michelle was there. She loved me, she still loves me. Whenever she got hurt, scraped her knee or got her nose bloodied, whatever it was, it was me she'd run to, never Helen. She'd come crying to me and I'd hug her and dry her tears and I'd tell her . . . I used to tell her. . . ." But he couldn't go on. He was close to tears himself; he could feel them hiding the corners of his eyes.

"I know what you used to tell her," said Barry Leighton in a sad, gentle voice.

"She remembered it," Cantling said. "She remembered it all those years. Helen got custody, they moved away, I didn't see her much, but Michelle always remembered, and when she was all grown up, after Helen was gone and Michelle was on her own, there was this time she got hurt, and I . . . I . . ."

"Yes," said Leighton. "I know."

The police were the ones that phoned him. Detective Joyce Brennan, that was her name, he would never forget that name. "Mister Cantling?" she said.

"Yes?"

"Mister Richard Cantling?"

"Yes," he said. "Richard Cantling the writer." He had gotten strange calls before. "What can I do for you?"

She identified herself. "You'll have to come down to the hospital," she said to him. "It's your daughter, Mister Cantling. I'm afraid she's been assaulted."

He hated evasion, hated euphemism. Cantling's characters never passed away, they died; they never broke wind, they farted. And Richard Cantling's daughter . . . "Assaulted?" he said. "Do you mean she's been assaulted or do you mean she's been raped?"

There was a silence on the other end of the line. "Raped," she said at last. "She's been raped, Mister Cantling."

"I'll be right down," he said.

She had in fact been raped repeatedly and brutally. Michelle had been as stubborn as Helen, as stubborn as Cantling himself. She wouldn't take

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his money, wouldn't take his advice, wouldn't take the help he offered her through his contacts in publishing. She was going to make it on her own. She waitressed in a coffee house in the Village, and lived in a large, drafty, and run-down warehouse loft down by the docks. It was a terrible neighborhood, a dangerous neighborhood, and Cantling had told her so a hundred times, but Michelle would not listen. She would not even let him pay to install good locks and a security system. It had been very bad. The man had broken in before dawn on a Friday morning. Michelle was alone. He had ripped the phone from the wall and held her prisoner there through Monday night. Finally one of the busboys from the coffee house had gotten worried and come by, and the rapist had left by the fire escape.

When they let him see her, her face was a huge purple bruise. She had burn marks all over her, where the man had used his cigarette, and three of her ribs were broken. She was far beyond hysteria. She screamed when they tried to touch her; doctors, nurses, it didn't matter, she screamed as soon as they got near. But she let Cantling sit on the edge of her bed, and take her in his arms, and hold her. She cried for hours, cried until there were no more tears in her. Once she called him "Daddy," in a choked sob. It was the only word she spoke; she seemed to have lost the capacity for speech. Finally they tranquilized her to get her to sleep.

Michelle was in the hospital for two weeks, in a deep state of shock. Her hysteria waned day by day, and she finally became docile, so they were able to fluff her pillows and lead her to the bathroom. But she still would not, or could not, speak. The psychologist told Cantling that she might never speak again. "I don't accept that," he said. He arranged Michelle's discharge. Simultaneously he decided to get them both out of this filthy hellhole of a city. She had always loved big old spooky houses, he remembered, and she used to love the water, the sea, the river, the lake. Cantling consulted realtors, considered a big place on the coast of Maine, and finally settled on an old steamboat gothic mansion high on the bluffs of Perrot, Iowa. He supervised every detail of the move.

Little by little, recovery began.

She was like a small child again, curious, restless, full of sudden energy. She did not talk, but she explored everything, went everywhere. In spring she spent hours up on the widow's walk, watching the big towboats go by on the Mississippi far below. Every evening they would walk together on the bluffs, and she would hold his hand. One day she turned and kissed him suddenly, impulsively, on his cheek. "I love you, Daddy," she said, and she ran away from him, and as Cantling watched her run, he saw a lovely, wounded woman in her mid-twenties, and saw too the gangling, coltish tomboy she had been.

The dam was broken after that day. Michelle began to talk again.

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Short, childlike sentences at first, full of childish fears and childish naivete. But she matured rapidly, and in no time at all she was talking politics with him, talking books, talking art. They had many a fine conversation on their evening walks. She never talked about the rape, though; never once, not so much as a word.

In six months she was cooking, writing letters to friends back in New York, helping with the household chores, doing lovely things in the garden. In eight months she had started to paint again. That was very good for her; now she seemed to blossom daily, to grow more and more radiant. Richard Cantling didn't really understand the abstractions his daughter liked to paint, he preferred representational art, and best of all he loved the self-portrait she had done for him when she was still an art major in college. But he could feel the pain in these new canvases of hers, he could sense that she was engaged in an exorcism of sorts, trying to squeeze the pus from some wound deep inside, and he approved. His writing had been a balm for his own wounds more than once. He envied her now, in a way. Richard Cantling had not written a word for more than three years. The crashing commercial failure of *ByeLine,* his best novel, had left him blocked and impotent. He'd thought perhaps the change of scene might restore him as well as Michelle, but that had been a vain hope. At least one of them was busy.

Finally, late one night after Cantling had gone to bed, his door opened and Michelle came quietly into his bedroom and sat on the edge of his bed. She was barefoot, dressed in a flannel nightgown covered with tiny pink flowers. "Daddy," she said, in a slurred voice.

Cantling had woken when the door opened. He sat up and smiled for her. "Hi," he said. "You've been drinking."

Michelle nodded. "I'm going back," she said. "Needed some courage, so's I could tell you."

"Going back?" Cantling said. "You don't mean to New York? You can't be serious!"

"I got to," she said. "Don't be mad. I'm better now."

"Stay here. Stay with me. New York is uninhabitable, Michelle."

"I don't want to go back. It scares me. But I got to. My friends are there. My work is there. My life is back there, Daddy. My friend Jimmy, you remember Jimmy, he's art director for this little paperback house, he can get me some cover assignments, he says. He wrote. I won't have to wait tables any more."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this," Richard Cantling said. "How can you go back to that damned city after what happened to you there?"

"That's why I have to go back," Michelle insisted. "That guy, what he did . . . what he did to me . . ." Her voice caught in her throat. She drew in her breath, got hold of herself. "If I don't go back, it's like he ran me

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out of town, took my whole life away from me, my friends, my art, everything. I can't let him get away with that, can't let him scare me off. I got to go back and take up what's mine, prove that I'm not afraid."

Richard Cantling looked at his daughter helplessly. He reached out, gently touched her long, soft hair. She had finally said something that made sense in his terms. He would do the same thing, he knew. "I understand," he said. "It's going to be lonely here without you, but I understand, I do."

"I'm scared," Michelle said. "I bought plane tickets. For tomorrow."

"So soon?"

"I want to do it quickly, before I lose my nerve," she said. "I don't think I've ever been this scared. Not even . . . not even when it was happening. Funny, huh?"

"No," said Cantling. "It makes sense."

"Daddy, hold me," Michelle said. She pressed herself into his arms. He hugged her and felt her body tremble.

"You're shaking," he said.

She wouldn't let go of him. "You remember, when I was real little, I used to have those nightmares, and I'd come bawling into your bedroom in the middle of the night and crawl into bed between you and Mommy."

Cantling smiled. "I remember," he said.

"I want to stay here tonight," Michelle said, hugging him even more tightly. "Tomorrow I'll be back there, alone. I don't want to be alone tonight. Can I, Daddy?"

Cantling disengaged gently, looked her in the eyes. "Are you sure?"

She nodded; a tiny, quick, shy nod. A child's nod.

He threw back the covers and she crept in next to him. "Don't go away," she said. "Don't even go to the bathroom, okay? Just stay right here with me."

"I'm here," he said. He put his arms around her, and Michelle curled up under the covers with her head on his shoulder. They lay together that way for a long time. He could feel her heart beating inside her chest. It was a soothing sound; soon Cantling began to drift back to sleep.

"Daddy?" she whispered against his chest.

He opened his eyes. "Michelle?"

"Daddy, I have to get rid of it. It's inside me and it's poison. I don't want to take it back with me. I have to get rid of it."

Cantling stroked her hair, long slow steady motions, saying nothing.

"When I was little, you remember, whenever I fell down or got in a fight, I'd come running to you, all teary, and show you my booboo. That's what I used to call it when I got hurt, remember, I'd say I had a booboo."

"I remember," Cantling said.

"And you, you'd always hug me and you'd say, 'Show me where it

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hurts,' and I would and you'd kiss it and make it better, you remember that? Show me where it hurts?"

Cantling nodded. "Yes," he said softly.

Michelle was crying quietly. He could feel the wetness soaking through the top of his pajamas. "I can't take it back with me, Daddy. I want to show you where it hurts. Please. Please."

He kissed the top of her head. "Go on."

She started at the beginning, in a halting whisper.

When dawn light broke through the bedroom windows, she was still talking. They never slept. She cried a lot, screamed once or twice, shivered frequently despite the weight of the blankets; Richard Cantling never let go of her, not once, not for a single moment. She showed him where it hurt.

Barry Leighton sighed. "It was a far, far better thing you did than you had ever done," he said. "Now if you'd only gone off to that far, far better rest right then and there, that very moment, everything would have been fine." He shook his head. "You never did know when to write Thirty, Cantling."

"Why?" Cantling demanded. "You're a good man, Leighton, tell me. Why is this happening. Why?"

The reporter shrugged. He was beginning to fade now. "That was the W that always gave me the most trouble," he said wearily. "Pick the story, and let me loose, and I could tell you the who and the what and the when and the where and even the how. But the *why* . . . ah, Cantling, you're the novelist, the whys are your province, not mine. The only Y that I ever really got on speaking terms with was the one goes with MCA."

Like the Cheshire cat, his smile lingered long after the rest of him was gone. Richard Cantling sat staring at the empty chair, at the abandoned tumbler, watching the whisky-soaked ice cubes melt slowly.

He did not remember falling asleep. He spent the night in the chair, and woke stiff and achey and cold. His dreams had been dark and shapeless and full of fear. He had slept well into the afternoon; half the day was gone. He made himself a tasteless breakfast in a kind of fog. He seemed distant from his own body, and every motion was slow and clumsy. When the coffee was ready, he poured a cup, picked it up, dropped it. The mug broke into a dozen pieces. Cantling stared down at it stupidly, watching rivulets of hot brown liquid run between the tiles. He did not have the energy to clean it up. He got a fresh mug, poured more coffee, managed to get down a few swallows.

The bacon was too salty; the eggs were runny, disgusting. Cantling

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pushed the meal away half-eaten, and drank more of the black, bitter coffee. He felt hung-over, but he knew that booze was not the problem.

Today, he thought. It will end today, one way or the other. She will not go back. *ByeLine* was his eighth novel, the next to last. Today the final portrait would arrive. A character from his ninth novel, his last novel. And then it would be over.

Or maybe just beginning.

How much did Michelle hate him? How badly had he wronged her? Cantling's hand shook; coffee slopped over the top of the mug, burning his fingers. He winced, cried out. Pain was so inarticulate. Burning. He thought of smoldering cigarettes, their tips like small red eyes. His stomach heaved. Cantling lurched to his feet, rushed to the bathroom. He got there just in time, gave his breakfast to the bowl. Afterwards he was too weak to move. He lay slumped against the cold white porcelain, his head swimming. He imagined somebody coming up behind him, taking him by the hair, forcing his face down into the water, flushing, flushing, laughing all the while, saying dirty, dirty, I'll get you clean, you're so dirty, flushing, flushing so the toilet ran and ran, holding his face down so the water and the vomit filled his mouth, his nostrils, until he could hardly breathe, until the world was almost black, until it was almost over, and then up again, laughing while he sucked in air, and then pushing him down again, flushing again, and again and again and again. But it was only his imagination. There was no one there. No one. Cantling was alone in the bathroom.

He forced himself to stand. In the mirror his face was gray and ancient, his hair filthy and unkempt. Behind him, leering over his shoulder, was another face. A man's face, pale and drawn, with black hair parted in the middle and slicked back. Behind a pair of small round glasses were eyes the color of dirty ice, eyes that moved constantly, frenetically, wild animals caught in a trap. They would chew off their own limbs to be free, those eyes. Cantling blinked and the face was gone. He turned on the cold tap, plunged his cupped hands under the stream, splashed water on his face. He could feel the stubble of his beard. He needed to shave. But there wasn't time, it wasn't important, he had to . . . he had to . . . .

He had to do something. Get out of there. Get away, get to someplace safe, somewhere his children couldn't find him.

But there was nowhere safe, he knew.

He had to reach Michelle, talk to her, explain, plead. She loved him. She *would* forgive him, she had to. She would call it off, she would tell him what to do.

Frantic, Cantling rushed back to the living room, snatched up the phone. He couldn't remember Michelle's number. He searched around,

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found his address book, flipped through it wildly. There, there; he punched in the numbers.

The phone rang four times. Then someone picked it up.

"Michelle—" he started.

"Hi," she said. "This is Michelle Cantling, but I'm not in right now. If you'll leave your name and number when you hear the tone, I'll get back to you, unless you're selling something."

The beep sounded. "Michelle, are you there?" Cantling said. "I know you hide behind the machine sometimes, when you don't want to talk. It's me. Please pick up. Please."

Nothing.

"Call me back, then," he said. He wanted to get it all in; his words tumbled over each other in their haste to get out. "I, you, you can't do it, please, let me explain, I never meant, I never meant, please . . ." There was the beep again, and then a dial tone. Cantling stared at the phone, hung up slowly. She would call him back. She had to, she was his daughter, they loved each other, she had to give him the chance to explain.

Of course, he had tried to explain before.

His doorbell was the old-fashioned kind, a brass key that projected out of the door. You had to turn it by hand, and when you did it produced a loud, impatient metallic rasp. Someone was turning it furiously, turning it and turning it and turning it. Cantling rushed to the door, utterly baffled. He had never made friends easily, and it was even harder now that he had become so set in his ways. He had no real friends in Perrot, a few acquaintances perhaps, no one who would come calling so unexpectedly, and twist the bell with such energetic determination.

He undid his chain and flung the door open, wrenching the bell key out of Michelle's fingers.

She was dressed in a belted raincoat, a knitted ski cap, a matching scarf. The scarf and a few loose strands of hair were caught in the wind, moving restlessly. She was wearing high, fashionable boots and carrying a big leather shoulder bag. She looked good. It had been almost a year since Cantling had seen her, on his last Christmas visit to New York. It had been two years since she'd moved back east.

"Michelle," Cantling said. "I didn't . . . this is quite a surprise. All the way from New York and you didn't even tell me you were coming?"

"No," she snapped. There was something wrong with her voice, her eyes. "I didn't want to give you any warning, you bastard. You didn't give me any warning."

"You're upset," Cantling said. "Come in, let's talk."

"I'll come in all right." She pushed past him, kicked the door shut behind her with so much force that the buzzer sounded again. Out of the

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wind, her face got even harder. "You want to know why I came? I am going to tell you what I think of you. Then I'm going to turn around and leave, I'm going to walk right out of this house and out of your fucking life, just like Mom did. She was the smart one, not me. I was dumb enough to think you loved me, crazy enough to think you cared."

"Michelle, don't," Cantling said. "You don't understand. I do love you. You're my little girl, you—"

"Don't you *dare*!" she screamed at him. She reached into her shoulder bag. "You call this *love*, you rotten bastard!" She pulled it out and flung it at him.

Cantling was not as quick as he'd been. He tried to duck, but it caught him on the side of his neck, and it hurt. Michelle had thrown it hard, and it was a big, thick, heavy hardcover, not some flimsy paperback. The pages fluttered as it tumbled to the carpet; Cantling stared down at his own photograph on the back of the dust-wrapper. "You're just like your mother," he said, rubbing his neck where the book had hit. "She always threw things too. Only you aim better." He smiled weakly.

"I'm not interested in your jokes," Michelle said. "I'll never forgive you. Never. Never ever. All I want to know is how you could do this to me, that's all. You tell me. You tell me now."

"I," Cantling said. He held his hands out helplessly. "Look, I . . . you're upset now, why don't we have some coffee or something, and talk about it when you calm down a little. I don't want a big fight."

"I don't give a fuck what you want," Michelle screamed. "I want to talk about it right now!" She kicked the fallen book.

Richard Cantling felt his own anger building. It wasn't right for her to yell at him like that, he didn't deserve this attack, he hadn't done anything. He tried not to say anything for fear of saying the wrong thing and escalating the situation. He knelt and picked up his book. Without thinking, he brushed it off, turned it over almost tenderly. The title glared up at him; stark, twisted red letters against a black background, the distorted face of a pretty young woman, mouth open in a scream. *Show Me Where It Hurts.*

"I was afraid you'd take it the wrong way," Cantling said.

"The *wrong way*!" Michelle said. A look of incredulity passed across her face. "Did you think I'd *like* it?"

"I, I wasn't sure," said Cantling. "I hoped . . . I mean, I was uncertain of your reaction, and so I thought it would be better not to mention what I was working on, until, well . . ."

"Until the fucking thing was in the bookstore windows," Michelle finished for him.

Cantling flipped past the title page. "Look," he said, holding it out, "I dedicated it to you." He showed her:

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To Michelle, who knew the pain.

Michelle swung at it, knocked it out of Cantling's hands. "You bastard," she said. "You think that makes it better? You think your stinking dedication excuses what you did? Nothing excuses it. I'll never forgive you."

Cantling edged back a step, retreating in the face of her fury. "I didn't do anything," he said stubbornly. "I wrote a book. A novel. Is that a crime?"

"You're my *father*," she shrieked. "You knew . . . you knew, you bastard, you knew I couldn't bear to talk about it, to talk about what happened. Not to my lovers or my friends or even my therapist. I can't, I just *can't*, I can't even think about it. You knew. I told you, I told only you, because you were my daddy and I trusted you and I had to get it out, and I told you, it was private, it was just between us, you knew, but what did you do? You wrote it all up in a goddamned book and *published* it for millions of people to read! Damn you, damn you. Were you planning to do that all along, you sonofabitch? Were you? That night in bed, were you memorizing every word?"

"I," said Cantling. "No, I didn't memorize anything, I just, well, I just remembered it. You're taking it all wrong, Michelle. The book's not about what happened to you. Yes, it's inspired by that, that was the starting point, but it's fiction, I changed things, it's just a novel."

"Oh yeah, Daddy, you changed things all right. Instead of Michelle Cantling it's all about Nicole Mitchell, and she's a fashion designer instead of an artist, and she's also kind of stupid, isn't she? Was that a change or is that what you think, that I was stupid to live there, stupid to let him in like that? It's all fiction, yeah. It's just a coincidence that it's about this girl that gets held prisoner and raped and tortured and terrorized and raped some more, and that you've got a daughter who was held prisoner and raped and tortured and terrorized and raped some more, right, just a fucking coincidence!"

"You don't understand," Cantling said helplessly.

"No, *you* don't understand. You don't understand what it's like. This is your biggest book in years, right? Number one best-seller, you've never been number one before, haven't even been on the lists since *Times Are Hard*, or was it *Black Roses*? And why not, why not number one, this isn't no boring story about a has-been newspaper, this is *rape*, hey, what could be hotter? Lots of sex and violence, torture and fucking and terror, and doncha know, *it really happened*, yeah." Her mouth twisted and trembled. "It was the worst thing that ever happened to me. It was all the nightmares that have ever been. I still wake up screaming sometimes, but I was getting better, it was behind me. And now it's there in every bookstore window, and all my friends know, everybody knows, strangers

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come up to me at parties and tell me how sorry they are." She choked back a sob; she was halfway between anger and tears. "And I pick up your book, your fucking no-good book, and there it is again, in black and white, all written down. You're such a fucking *good* writer, Daddy, you make it all so real. A book you can't put down. Well, I put it down but it didn't help, it's all there, now it will always be there, won't it? Every day somebody in the world will pick up your book and read it and I'll get raped again. That's what you did. You finished the job for him, Daddy. You violated me, took me without my consent, just like he did. You raped me. You're my own father and you *raped* me!"

"You're not being fair," Cantling said. "I never meant to hurt you. The book . . . Nicole is strong and smart. It's the man who's the monster. He uses all those different names because fear has a thousand names, but only one face, you see. He's not just a man, he's the darkness made flesh, the mindless violence that waits out there for all of us, the gods that play with us like flies, he's a symbol of all—"

"He's the man who raped me! He's not a symbol!".

She screamed it so loudly that Richard Cantling had to retreat in the face of her fury. "No," he said. "He's just a character. He's . . . Michelle, I know it hurts, but what you went through, it's something people should know about, should think about, it's a part of life. Telling about life, making sense of it, that's the job of literature, that's my job. Someone had to tell your story. I tried to make it true, tried to do my—"

His daughter's face, red and wet with tears, seemed almost feral for a moment, unrecognizable, inhuman. Then a curious calm passed across her features. "You got one thing right," she said. "Nicole didn't have a father. When I was a little kid I'd come to you crying and my daddy would say show me where it hurts, and it was a private thing, a special thing, but in the book Nicole doesn't have a father, he says it, you gave it to him, he says show me where it hurts, he says it all the time. You're so ironic. You're so clever. The way he said it, it made him so real, more real than when he *was* real. And when you wrote it, you were right. That's what the monster says. Show me where it hurts. That's the monster's line. Nicole doesn't have a father, he's dead, yes, that was right too. I don't have a father. No I don't."

"Don't you talk to me like that," Richard Cantling said. It was terror inside him; it was shame. But it came out anger. "I won't have that, no matter what you've been through. I'm your father."

"No," Michelle said, grinning crazy now, backing away from him. "No, I don't have a father, and you don't have any children, no, unless it's in your books. Those are your children, your only children. Your books, your damned fucking books, those are your children, those are your children, those are your children." Then she turned and ran past him,

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down the foyer. She stopped at the door to his den. Cantling was afraid of what she might do. He ran after her.

When he reached the den, Michelle had already found the knife and set to work.

Richard Cantling sat by his silent phone and watched his grandfather clock tick off the hours toward darkness.

He tried Michelle's number at three o'clock, at four, at five. The machine, always the machine, speaking in a mockery of her voice. His messages grew more desperate. It was growing dim outside. His light was fading.

Cantling heard no steps on his porch, no knock on his door, no rasping summons from his old brass bell. It was an afternoon as silent as the grave. But by the time evening had fallen, he knew it was out there. A big square package, wrapped in brown paper, addressed in a hand he had known well. Inside a portrait.

He had not understood, not really, and so she was teaching him.

The clock ticked. The darkness grew thicker. The sense of a waiting presence beyond his door seemed to fill the house. His fear had been growing for hours. He sat in the armchair with his legs pulled up under him, his mouth hanging open, thinking, remembering. Heard cruel laughter. Saw the dim red tips of cigarettes in the shadows, moving, circling. Imagined their small hot kisses on his skin. Tasted urine, blood, tears. Knew violence, knew violation, of every sort there was. His hands, his voice, his face, his face, his face. The character with a dozen names, but fear had only a single face. The youngest of his children. His baby. His monstrous baby.

He had been blocked for so long, Cantling thought. If only he could make her understand. It was a kind of impotence, not writing. He had been a writer, but that was over. He had been a husband, but his wife was dead. He had been a father, but she got better, went back to New York. She left him alone, but that last night, wrapped in his arms, she told him the story, she showed him where it hurt, she gave him all that pain. What was he to do with it?

Afterwards he could not forget. He thought of it constantly. He began to reshape it in his head, began to grope for the words, the scenes, the symbols that would make sense of it. It was hideous, but it was life, raw strong life, the grist for Cantling's mill, the very thing he needed. She had showed him where it hurt; he could show them all. He did resist, he did try. He began a short story, an essay, finished some reviews. But it returned. It was with him every night. It would not be denied.

He wrote it.

"Guilty," Cantling said in the darkened room. And when he spoke the

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word, a kind of acceptance seemed to settle over him, banishing the terror. He was guilty. He had done it. He would accept the punishment, then. It was only right.

Richard Cantling stood and went to his door.

The package was there.

He lugged it inside, still wrapped, carried it up the stairs. He would hang him beside the others, beside Dunnahoo and Cissy and Barry Leighton, all in a row, yes. He went for his hammer, measured carefully, drove the nail. Only then did he unwrap the portrait, and look at the face within.

It captured her as no other artist had ever done, not just the lines of her face, the high angular cheekbones and blue eyes and tangled ash-blond hair, but the personality inside. She looked so young and fresh and confident, and he could see the strength there, the courage, the stubbornness. But best of all he liked her smile. It was a lovely smile, a smile that illuminated her whole face. The smile seemed to remind him of someone he had known once. He couldn't remember who.

Richard Cantling felt a strange, brief sense of relief, followed by an even greater sense of loss, a loss so terrible and final and total that he knew it was beyond the power of the words he worshipped.

Then the feeling was gone.

Cantling stepped back, folded his arms, studied the four portraits. Such excellent work; looking at the paintings, he could almost feel their presence in his house.

Dunnahoo, his first-born, the boy he wished he'd been.

Cissy, his true love.

Barry Leighton, his wise and tired alter-ego.

Nicole, the daughter he'd never had.

His people. His characters. His children.

A week later, another, much smaller, package arrived. Inside the carton were copies of four of his novels, a bill, and a polite note from the artist inquiring if there would be any more commissions.

Richard Cantling said no, and paid the bill by check. ●

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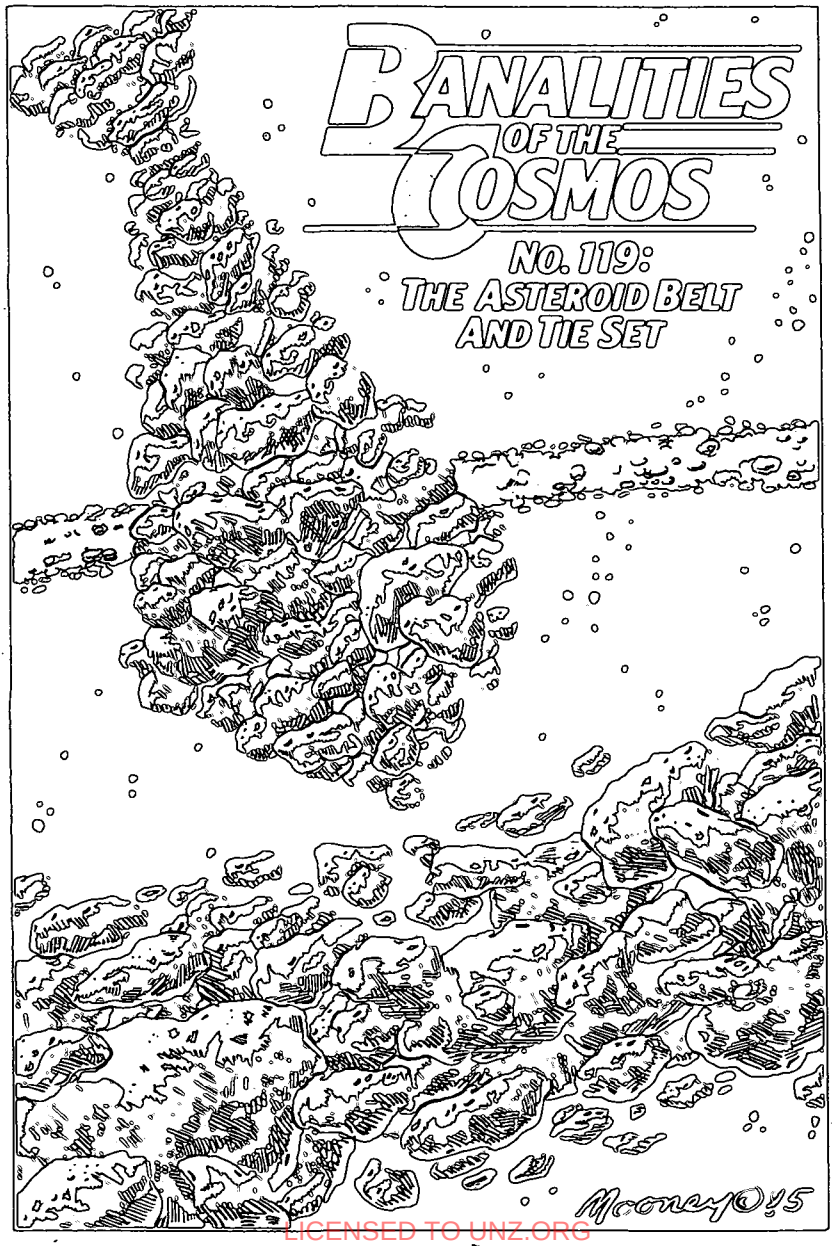

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

BOOKS INTO MOVIES

A new stage in the evolution of the relationship between the literature and the cinema of SF would now seem to be under way.

With the release of *Blade Runner, Dune,* and *2010,* and with *The Stars My Destination, Bug Jack Barron, Enemy Mine,* and other films in the works, as well as with at least two forthcoming TV anthology series, it would seem that—with SF film-making having consolidated its position of dominance at the box office, and TV finally realizing that it better at least try to play catch-up—too many people have seen too many SF films and gotten too sophisticated, and too much new product is needed for the film and TV people to rely on their own questionable genius anymore. So they're doing what every other major-league commercial film genre has long been doing: they're looking for literary properties to adapt.

One would think that such a course of action would have been self-evident to any form of life of sufficient sapience to chew gum and sign checks at the same time, but as we all know, SF film-making arose in the Cretaceous swamps of the 1950s as a giant reptile slinking towards Tokyo and Hollywood to be born, didn't even evolve into primate form until *Planet of the Apes* and *2001,* and only in the past few years has the creature actually learned how to read.

As to how *well* it has learned to read, that we will get to later.

Suffice it to say that in the primary stage relationship between the literature of SF and SF movies, the two genres had little in common, except that since the moron monster movies were called science fiction, the public at large tended to equate SF novels with those self-same slimy reptilians.

Even the dominant imagery had little in common. SF novels of the 1950s tended much more to spaceships and nuclear holocaust than to giant ants and killer carrots. Most of the exceptions only proved the point.

How many people who watched James Arness do crazed gorilla numbers as the vegetable monster from outer space in *The Thing* knew that in the original, John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There?," the alien thawed from the ice was of sufficient puissance and malign

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intelligence to perfectly mimic any life-form, including the human characters?

When "sci-fi movies" *did* involve spaceships and other planets, they tended to be travelogue primers like *Destination Moon* and *The Conquest of Space* or monster movies transferred to an unearthly venue.

Of course there were the occasional honorable exceptions like *The War of the Worlds, Forbidden Planet, The Day the Earth Stood Still, When Worlds Collide, The Circus of Dr. Lao, The Power,* but more of these than not were the creations, one way or another, of a lone individual, George Pal.

So generally speaking, before the advent of *2001, Star Trek,* and *Star Wars,* SF movies did not use the literature as source material, and greatly harmed the general public acceptance of the literature by equating it in the eyes of the uninitiated reader with giant apes, crazed reptilians, flying saucers, and Creatures from the Green Latrine.

With press agents like these, who needed enemies?

Long about the middle of the 1960s, this situation began to mutate drastically for the better. Kubrick's *2001* was the first SF film by a director with front-line international cachet, *Planet of the Apes* did major box office, and most important of all, *Star Trek* had three seasons in prime time and then became the world champion of syndication.

Far too little attention has been paid to *Star Trek* as the pivotal work in the growth of SF cinema into a dominant force, and the concurrent growth of SF publishing into what it is today. Without *Star Trek, Star Wars* would never have been a viable project, let alone the unprecedented box office bonanza that launched a thousand kit-bashed spaceships. And without the emergence of a dominant SF film genre spawned by *Star Wars,* there probably wouldn't be half so many SF novels on the best seller list.

The creation of the *Star Trek* concept (as opposed to the wildly uneven quality and level of intent of the episodes) was a cunning and audacious stroke of genius which changed the relation of SF to popular culture forever.

By setting his series aboard a wandering starship whose sets could be endlessly reused, Gene Roddenberry was able to keep his budgets within the realm of TV practicality, and do an SF anthology series, wherein the mandatory running characters could each week confront a new story and setting which was entirely self-contained.

While *Star Trek* limped along for 3 years in the Nielsens before expiring, *over 20 million people a week* watched the Starship *Enterprise* on its five-year mission to explore the galaxy, and a whole generation grew up on the endless re-runs. More people saw *Star Trek* every week than read a work of printed SF in five years.

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Star Trek imprinted the imagery of science fiction on mass public consciousness where it had never been before, opening, thereby, the languages and concerns of science fiction to a mass audience for the very first time. And *Star Trek*, whatever the show's artistic shortcomings, at least imprinted the imagery and schtick of *real* science fiction onto popular culture, so that years and a generation of Trekkies later, George Lucas could confidently begin *Star Wars* with a full-bore space chase and take the largest film audiences in history with him from the opening shot.

And so stage two began, in which SF film-making boomed to dominance, and SF literature broke the bonds of its little pocket universe to conquer the best-seller list.

It's science fiction time now. A general audience will now accept any science fictional premise, and a good many too asinine to be acceptable in the pages of this magazine to boot. Two whole generations of viewers and readers have grown up on *Star Trek* and one on *Star Wars* and the new SF cinema.

Sure, most of it has been pretty primitive stuff by the critical standards within science fiction's literary realm. After all, most of it has been aimed squarely at an adolescent audience, the audience which demographically dominates the box office, kids who were weaned on Mr. Spock and underwent puberty rites with Luke Skywalker.

So rather than look to the literature for source material, second stage SF films have tended to be inspired by *Star Trek, Star Wars,* Superman comics, arcade games, and the rest of the simple SF imagery which has long since become the lingua franca of American adolescence.

The thing of it is, is that until rather recently, cinematic SF has been a relentlessly commercial genre demographically targeted at this huge adolescent audience, which has meant, for the most part, simple good versus evil action-adventure plotting designed to show off special effects, and no adult artistic intent as such.

Second-stage cinematic SF was at the same artistic stage as the early SF pulps, turned out by professional writers from other commercial genres for an adolescent audience, the big difference being that *this* adolescent audience was a *mass* adolescent audience.

For this, you do not need to adapt science fiction novels—indeed, just about the only way you *can* adapt them is by reducing them to your perception of the demographic target, à la the execrable film version of *Damnation Alley,* where Hell Tanner was given a bath and a shave and stripped of his Hell's Angels colors.

But as the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* generation matures, a good many of however many of these kids start reading for pleasure at all naturally turn to reading science fiction, and by now there is a generation of American *adults* who grew up on SF, as witness the fact

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that we now have *hardcover* SF best-sellers, and at $17.95 a pop, not too many of these are being bought by kids with their lunch money.

So by now the mass audience for SF, both literary and cinematic, spans all ages and levels of sophistication, and now even adolescents are more blasé about primitive SF than they once were. Thus the current stage of the relationship between cinematic and literary SF has been attained, wherein the film and TV makers are now looking at adult science fiction novels and stories to adapt for films aimed at adult audiences.

Such adaptations are not without precedent; George Pal adapted such novels as *The War of the Worlds* and *When Worlds Collide,* Truffaut adapted *Fahrenheit 451,* and there were others, but for a variety of dialectical reasons, Stanley Kubrick's *2001* is the most important ancestor of the *artistically ambitious* SF film.

For one thing Kubrick was at the time unquestionably a world-class director, and for another thing, after *Dr. Strangelove,* Kubrick quite consciously set out to "make a science fiction film," not realizing he had already done so.

I happened to have worked at the time in the literary agency that put together the deal, and the inside story is quite instructive. All Kubrick knew was that he wanted to make a science fiction film and that he wanted to collaborate on the screenplay with a science fiction writer. Among the things he looked at was Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Sentinel." Something clicked, and that's how the collaboration between Clarke and Kubrick began.

And what an intimate and recomplicated collaboration it was! The book and the screenplay were written more or less simultaneously, with Kubrick doing more of the screenplay work and Clarke really writing the novel, so that *2001,* the novel, was neither a novelization of a screenplay nor the novel from which the screenplay was adapted, but Arthur C. Clarke's novelization of a Kubrick-dominated storyline which in turn had been generated by a couple of Clarke's own stories. It is not likely that there will ever again be a cross-fertilization between SF cinema and SF literature quite as intimate and convoluted as this.

Unless, of course, you count this union's ultimate progeny, *2010.* Whereas *2001,* the novel, was a kind of symbiote of the screenplay, *2010,* the novel, was written before there was any movie project, though Arthur C. Clarke must surely have known full well that the film sequel would then become inevitable. Clarke was much more in control here with Peter Hyams than he was with Kubrick, indeed *2010,* the novel, was written in part to clarify some of what Clarke felt was the murk at the end of *2001.* He consulted with Hyams, who wrote and directed, throughout the writing of

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the screenplay, so *2010* should certainly serve as the ideal test case for how far the art of adapting SF novels to film has and has not come since its illustrious ancestor opened the way for the major SF film made for adults.

In the book, as in the film, nine years after HAL did his dingo act and Bowman metamorphosed into the "Star Child," a mixed crew of Americans and Russians go out to the Jovian satellites on a Russian ship, the *Leonov,* to find out what happened. In the film, as in the book, they see evidence of life on Europa, but are warned off by the force of the giant monolith, and then go on to rendezvous with the *Discovery* orbiting Io.

In the film, as in the novel, HAL is reactivated and cured of his insanity, and Bowman somehow reappears both on Earth and in the *Discovery,* where he warns them to depart within two days, as war on Earth seems imminent. This leads into the climactic plot schtick where the *Discovery* and HAL are expended as a first stage booster to kick the *Leonov* into emergency escape trajectory. The off-stage forces of the Monolith then turn Jupiter into a second sun, leaving the message that all the Jovian satellites are now given as worlds to men, save Europa, which is declared off limits.

Plot element for plot element, the film follows the book, and the special effects, the visuals of the Jovian satellites, and particularly the scenes of Earth with two suns in its sky at the end, admirably convey that hard-edged sense of the transcendental reality of space that we associate with Clarke's vision.

Yet the film ends up being only a pale shadow of the book, not perhaps for lack of intent, or even lack of skill, but because of a fundamental translation problem with adapting literary SF to film.

Namely, that it is virtually impossible to render either point-of-view changes or internal states of consciousness in a film.

In the book, the revived Bowman is a viewpoint character, and through the filter of his alien-altered consciousness, we get Clarke's considered explication of the nature of the galactic culture behind the events of the plot, and we get a grand tour of the ecospheres of Europa, and we see that Jupiter is being turned into a second sun at least as much for the benefit of the future evolution of the bioforms of Europa as for the benefit of man. In the book, the disembodied Bowman prevails upon his mighty alien masters to grant the consciousness of the dying HAL the same sort of discorporate immortality they have granted him. All this is really the heart and soul of Clarke's novel.

And none of it is in the film.

Without it, we have a film without a *raison d'etre,* we have pretty pictures and a more or less standardized plot, and a plea for detente, and all the phenomenological events of the novel. But where the

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intellectual and emotional core of the novel should have been, we have only the same mystification with which Kubrick faked his way out of the impossibility of presenting a true vision of what lay out there in the galaxy at the anticlimactically abstract end of *2001*.

God or the Great Monolith only knows how Hyams might have solved this problem. Clearly an act of creative inspiration on the part of the screenwriter was required, for the inherently novelistic heart of Clarke's book cannot simply be literally translated to film, and indeed that may be what makes the book a real novel as opposed to a time-warped novelization.

Hyams was neither right nor wrong in leaving out what he did. He really had no choice—he had to leave it out because there was probably no way to put it in.

So he followed the path of least resistance along the plotline and made a film that was faithful to the story and characters and respectful to the ambiance, but which seems intellectually and spiritually empty when judged against the book.

This, admittedly, is not merely a problem endemic to the translation of science fiction novels to films, it is a problem inherent in the translation of *any* novel to film. Most novels are of sufficient density and complexity that a complete film version would have a running time of 10 hours, and most novels have elements such as stream of consciousness and multiple viewpoint which simply do not translate to film.

Science fiction novels, though, present a further difficulty in this regard because another thing you cannot even attempt in a film without rendering audiences irately comatose is *exposition*. You cannot, or at any rate should not, have a voice-over narrating the relationship of history to the timeframe, the society to the characters, the scientific extrapolation to the culture, the individual to the body politic.

Science fiction novelists, though, do all of this all of the time; we have evolved a huge bag of tricks for integrating necessary exposition into a story-line, and, in common with all novelists, for making the skein of events of the story resonate with larger social, esthetic, and spiritual concerns.

Indeed, it is arguable that this is most of what people read science fiction novels for, this speculative fusion of intellectual extrapolation and analysis with a good tale well told.

Does this mean that serious filmmakers should give up the attempt to adapt science fiction novels? Are all such adaptations doomed to be cinematic Classic Comics by the very nature of the medium?

Indeed there are some exemplary arguments for the case that films in general and SF films in particular are more artistically successful when they are conceived originally for the medium to start with. Certainly most of the artis-

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tically successful SF films of the past few years were the original visions of the film-makers, notably the films of David Cronenberg and Larry Cohen, *Liquid Sky,* and so forth.

But the trouble is that original SF films require a creative genius who understands both science fiction and the art of film-making, and such rare creatures seem likely to remain in short supply. And the opportunity is that over half a century, a vast body of science fiction novels and stories have been published which could be translated into wonderful films.

It can be done.

It has been done.

But not the way most people seem to think it should be done.

Let us therefore contemplate the current most perfect example of precisely how *not* to translate an SF novel to film, *Dune.*

Admittedly, the De Laurentiis organization set itself a formidable task. Not only are the plots and subplots endlessly complicated, the novel is very long indeed, a good deal of it takes place inside people's heads, and the theme and storylines are inextricably bound up in the extrapolative details of a very complex civilization, or rather two complex civilizations, that of a galactic empire and that of the desert Fremen. Giant sandworms to get in the can without looking ridiculous. Three planetary ambiances. Formidable! Dino and Raffaella stride boldly in where Maxim Jodorowski fell flat on his face and Hollywood angels fear to tread..

The tragedy of *Dune,* the movie, is that it *is* a tragedy, a noble attempt at a heroic task that produced an artistic and box-office catastrophe.

For *Dune* coulda been the champ.

Here was arguably one of the great science fiction novels of all time, a book which over the years rose to best-sellerdom on its own merits, a book woven into the psyche of more than one generation, and a project therefore that millions of potential ticket buyers desperately wanted to see succeed.

And Dino De Laurentiis seemed to have set the project up with a proper balance of high style and prudent business practice. He paid Frank Herbert big bucks and virtually insisted by making an offer no one could refuse that Herbert at least be the first to try writing the screenplay. By shooting it in Mexico, his budget was leveraged by a big factor, meaning that dollar for dollar he could put more pizazz up on the screen, and the large amount of capital he was leveraging in the first place meant that the money was there for effects and sets that would be state of the art.

When Herbert's script bombed out, they hired David Lynch to write and direct, and Herbert, with no ego-attachment to his own script, became Lynch's friendly consultant.

Which, in retrospect, can be seen to be the moment when things began to fall apart.

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While Lynch's previous films, *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man,* were evidence of his undeniable talent as a film-maker, what made De Laurentiis think his sensibility synced with that of Herbert's novel must forever remain a mystery to those who have seen either one of them.

While one may admire De Laurentiis' daring in bringing in a talented young director of real artistic depth and subtlety rather than the best-available Lucas clone, the use of such a director who had no familiarity with or demonstrated understanding of literary science fiction would certainly seem to mandate that he be handed a script by someone who did.

Instead, *quelle horreur,* Lynch wrote the script while Herbert cheered him on!

The very first shot of the film reveals what is to come, as the audience, groaning and fidgeting, is subjected to the literal Talking Head of the Princess Irulan babbling backstory for what seems like several centuries.

But there is worse, much worse, soon to come. As scenes play out, we often hear the voice-overs of the characters speaking their thoughts while the camera holds close up. If their thoughts were true stream of consciousness or ironic commentary on the dialogue, this attempt to include Herbert's use of shifting viewpoints just might have worked, but instead the characters' thoughts serve as lame expository a tempts to explain to the increasingly befuddled audience what the hell is going on and why they should give a damn about any of it.

Right away you know what's gone wrong with this film. Any time a film relies on voice-overs reading deathless prose from the novel, you know that either the writer failed to translate the story to cinematic terms, or that the director has developed a stupefyingly literal-minded faithfulness to the book.

Here, since David Lynch was both the writer and director, we end up with the worst of all possible worlds, which is to say *both.* Lynch genuinely wanted to be faithful to Frank Herbert's novel, but he didn't understand what the *story* of *Dune* was at all, and so his faithfulness took the form of trying to get in all the characters and subplots and using Herbert's words generously. And Herbert, seeing how Lynch was trying to follow his book scene by scene as best as was humanly possible, and already having failed at adapting it himself, couldn't see what was wrong either.

What was wrong, of course, is that a film is not a novel, and it cannot simply reproduce the multiple plot-lines of the novel, first because it would run 10 hours if it did, and secondly because it would be a tendentious bore. A film must abstract the essential story and spirit of a novel, and then structure itself cinematically in a manner which conveys that story and spirit truly. One would think that it

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would go without saying that before this is possible either the screenwriter or director and preferably both should know what the real story of the novel is.

But Lynch, who was both, had no idea what the real story of *Dune* was, and Herbert, who saw him attempting to be so faithful to the detail and plot of the novel, apparently couldn't tell him.

It shouldn't have been so difficult. The plot of *Dune* is quite complex, but the *story* is archetypally simple. An orphaned young prince flees into the desert from the usurpers of his rightful throne, and there among the mystic rebels, with the help of courage, and destiny, and psychedelic visions, he is transformed into the warrior prophet of the people, and leads them to a victory which crowns him with the godhead.

That's the heart and soul of *Dune,* and it can hardly be said to lack power, compression, or coherence! This primal-level Jungian fairy-tale at its core is why the novel lives as a classic, and it's also why, by the way, all the subsequent sequels that do not have Paul Atreides at their center are pale shadows.

Had Lynch found that core, he could have freely embellished any of his own glosses he liked upon it, thrown out as much plot-complication as did not define it, and still have been truly faithful to the novel.

Indeed, even if Lynch didn't understand the story, at least he should have been able to read the title, which clearly indicates that the essential story takes place on Arrakis. Instead, *Dune,* the movie, takes about half its running time getting to Dune, the planet, and the real story is chopped up and compressed into meaningless action scenes in the second half.

Nor does Lynch have any feeling for the desert planet and what it stands for ecologically and mystically. On his planet of sun and sand, everyone wears dark clothing and huddles indoors in windowless gray castles, which almost would have worked, had not the Fremen been seen to live in caves done up by the same depressive junkie decorator, who also took away their flowing desert robes designed to blend with the color and spirit of the, ah, Dunes, and stuffed them into skin-tight black rubber fetish suits to broil and sweat in the blazing sun.

Enough! Do we really need to contemplate the Baron Harkonnen's pustules or the love story between Paul and Chani which is detailed in a couple of breathless voice-over narrations, or the climactic scene which doesn't quite make clear that Paul is now emperor?

Rather than contemplate this fiasco further, let us draw the lesson of *Dune*'s failure, and seal up the body-bag. Which is, that the way to translate a novel to film is not with literal-minded doggedness, but by understanding the inner story and spirit, and then doing your own

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creative thing in cinematic terms with that inner story at its heart.

So finally, rather than end this essay on a note of despair, let us consider a film whose writer and director did seem to understand this, *Blade Runner,* and see how it can be done.

For various reasons, I avoided seeing *Blade Runner* for as long as I could. Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was one of my personal favorites, Phil was a close personal friend, and Phil had made it quite clear in public and private that he considered the first-draft screenplay an atrocity.

What was more, Ridley Scott, the director, the previous intellectual high point of whose career had been *Alien,* was making a boor and a fool of himself in public by declaring his intention not to read the book upon which his film was to be based lest he contaminate the purity of his vision.

Then Phil died, and the film came out, and it died at the box-office, and people said it was nothing like the novel at all, and I had no desire to see what an arrogant, pinhead action director had done to such an intellectually and spiritually subtle novel, so I had to be practically conned into seeing it.

I had somehow managed to forget that a new script had been written by Scott and David Peeples, and that Phil, at the end, had declared that screenplay a work of genius which captured the spirit of the world he had created. Maybe Scott had just been shooting his mouth off for the benefit of the studio, who wanted something they could market to the *Star Wars* audience of adolescents, or maybe, just maybe, he had really been serious.

Maybe all Scott wanted to know was the essential story of the novel and to hell with the plot details, maybe he trusted Peeples enough to abstract this from the book, so that the two of them could then recomplicate it into cinematic storytelling without getting bogged down in literal-minded mechanical faithfulness to the apparatus of the novel.

However they did it, Scott and Peeples did precisely right that which Lynch did so precisely wrong.

Lynch had been mechanically faithful to Herbert's apparatus to the point of excruciation and so he ended up with everything but the real story, whereas Scott and Peeples threw out most of Dick's novelistic apparatus, replaced it with creative cinematic apparatus of their own, and so, by chopping down the necessary trees, attained a clear vision of the forest.

In the film as in the novel, we have Deckard, the android hunter (though in the film he is called a Blade Runner and the androids replicants), and the runaway androids, their short lifespans running out, wanting only to live, but lacking any human sense of *caritas,* having absolutely no concern for any life other than their own. If they ruthlessly kill humans to

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survive, then the humans, in the form of Deckard, are also engaging in the exact same moral behavior in regard to them.

The question upon which the story then revolves is who is the human and who is the android and Dick's criterion is a moral one. A human is a being possessed of *caritas;* we define our humanity by our ability to see the mirror of that humanity in others. An android is a sentient being devoid of *caritas,* a psychopathic creature of pure survival mechanism, incapable of empathy.

There is much in Dick's novel—a whole post-catastrophe world, a religion, wonderful minor characters, humor—that is not in the film, which no doubt is why people complain that it is not "faithful" to the novel.

But when the dying replicant Roy Batty, who moments before was slowly relishing the sadistic death he had been in the process of inflicting on Deckard in vengeance for Deckard's cold extermination of his comrades, reaches out his hand and saves Deckard's life after visible consideration at death's door, *Blade Runner* achieves the ultimate in true faithfulness to the novel.

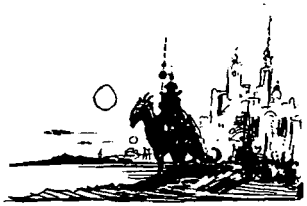
In a scene that was not in the book, it poignantly and forcefully manifests Dick's true meaning in entirely cinematic terms, that "human" and "android" are moral and spiritual definitions and not a matter of protoplasm. That by achieving empathy, a manufactured creature can gain its humanity, just as by losing it, a natural man can become a human android.

And indeed, as we can see, this lesson is applicable to the true translation of the science fiction novel into film.

For just as we forgive Roy Batty his monsterhood when he attains moral humanity in the epiphany of the film, so can we forgive *Blade Runner* its free play with the plot and characters and ambiance of the novel in the magic moment thereof.

For, warts and all, *Blade Runner* proves in that moment that it is no cinematic android like *Dune,* no Disneyland simulacrum of a great science fiction novel with nothing but a vacuum where the heart of the novel should be. By its empathy with the spirit of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Blade Runner* attains the humanity of the novel, and so successfully translates Dick's true vision to film.

All else is Muzak. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

October is one of the busiest months of the year for SF conventions. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the big, iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, playing a musical keyboard.

SEPTEMBER, 1985

20-22—**MosCon.** For info, write: **Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Or phone: **(208) 882-1611** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Moscow ID (if city omitted, same as in address) at Cavanaugh's Motor Inn. Guests will include: artist Rick Sternbach, John ("Titan") Varley. Costumes.

20-23—**NotJustAnotherCon, % U. Mass. SF Society, RSO Box 104, U. of Mass., Amherst MA 01003.**

21-22—**ValleyCon 10.** Holiday Inn I-29, Fargo ND. Patricia Wrede. Costume, pun, trivia contests.

OCTOBER, 1985

4-6—**Contradiction, % Pepe, 147 Huntington Ave., Buffalo NY 14214.** Niagara Falls. Nancy Kress, Patricia McKillip, Judith Merril. Chocolate symposium & pigout, Batsu breakfast club, masquerade.

11-13—**WindyCon, Box 432, Chicago IL 60690.** C. J. Cherryh, Algis Budrys, artist Todd Hamilton.

11-13—**Aquarius, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** W. A. (Bob) Tucker. A low-key semi-relaxacon.

12-14—**NonCon, % Gillies, 4912 54th #305, Red Deer AB T4N 6P4, Canada.** John Varley, fan Steve Forty, Lorna Toomis. Sunday brunch, Jacuzzi party. This con moves around Alberta from year to year.

18-20—**FantastiCon, Box 781, Red Bluff CA 96080. (916) 529-2636.** Redding CA. R. Faraday Nelson, R. Bretnor, Dean Ing, D. Gerrold, Bob Vardeman, S. Sucharitkul, etc. Quite a lineup. "Unbanquet."

19-20—**FallCon, 1122 W. Univ. Av., Gainesville FL 32601. (904) 374-8593.** Piers Anthony, D. Sim.

25-27—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Denver CO 80227. (303) 934-7659/936-4092.** Sucharitkul, Ed Bryant.

25-27—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** *Hal Clement, M. A. Foster, R. Pini.*

25-27—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244.** Coralville IA. Joe Haldeman. Tenth annual Iowa con.

26-27—**BeneluxCon, Postbus 1189, 8200 BD, Lelystad, Netherlands.** A.M. van Ewyck. 12th annual.

31-Nov. 3—**World Fantasy Con, Box 27201, Tucson AZ 85282. (602) 968-5673.** Evangeline Walton, Stephen R. Donaldson, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, M. Hague. Awards banquet. The fantasy fan's WorldCon.

NOVEMBER, 1985

1-3—**NovaCon, % Poole, 86 Berwood Farm Rd., Wylde Green, Sutton Goldfield, W. Midlands, B72 1AG, UK.** Coventry, England. James ("Dream Millennium") White, Dave Langford. Fifteenth annual con.

1-3—**NovaCon, Box 41, Marietta PA 17547.** Samuel R. Delany, Somtow Sucharitkul, Richard (Elfquest) Pini. Some occult emphasis. Participatory murder mystery: "Who Killed Papa Smurf?" 3rd annual con.

8-10—**TzarKon, % Edwards, 1040 McKnight Rd., Richmond Hts. MO 63117 (314) 991-1743.** St. Louis MO.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation, 2500 N. Atlanta #1986, Smyrna GA 30080. (404) 438-3943.** Atlanta GA. Ray Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, B. (Slow Glass) Shaw. The WorldCon for 1986, back in the USA.

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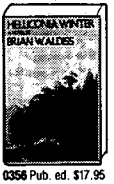

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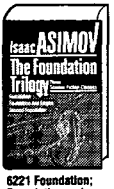

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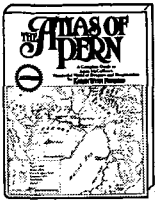

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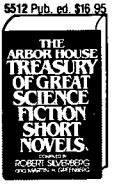

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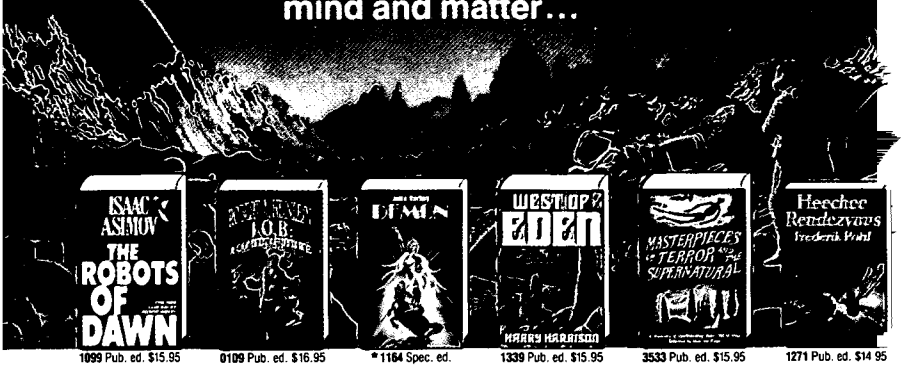

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